written by
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NOVEL 6
THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY
I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...

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I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
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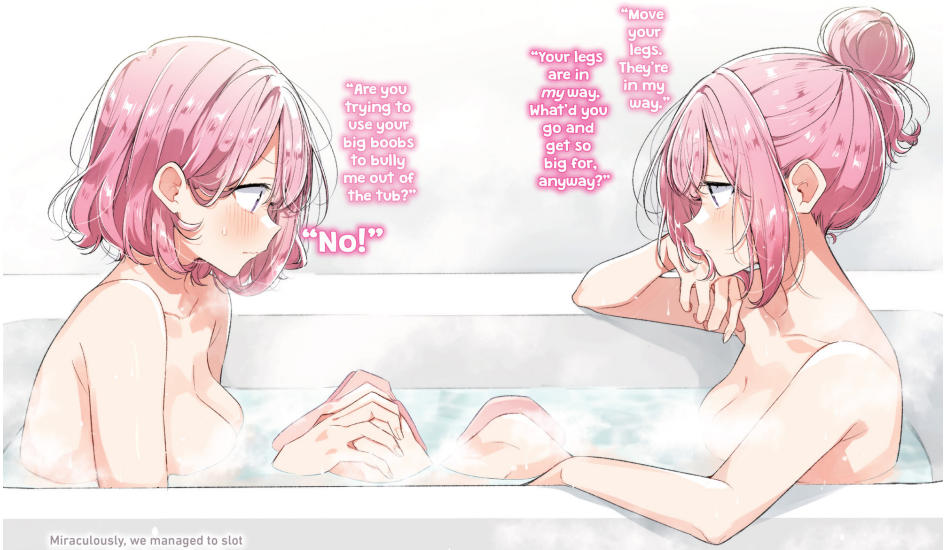
"Yoo-hoo! Thank you so, so much for waiting."
"So I hear you want to talk about Haruna."
"I'm not going to school anymore."
MINATO
Haruna's friend. Wants to be a fashion designer when she grows up.
SEIRA
Haruna's friend. Known in the cosplayer world as TweenCosplayer Serara.
HARUNA
Renako's little sister. Has a good head on her shoulders and a distinct lack of social anxiety.



Miraculously, we managed to slot ourselves into place and settle down facing each other, our backs up against the sides of the tub.

SATSUKI AND KAHO
IN CHINESE-INSPIRED OUTFITS

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Friends? Lovers?

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THE KOTO SATSUKI KRONICLES SEASON 1 .....

There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless...

6

WRITTEN BY

Teren Mikami

ILLUSTRATED BY

Eku Takeshima

Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHIGA KOIBITONI NARERUWAKE NAIJAN, MURIMURI!
(MURI JA NAKATTA!?)
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Prologue

AH, ESTEEMED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, it is my great pleasure to make your acquaintance. Oh, who am I, you ask? My good sir or madam, you *do* make me laugh. *Tee hee hee*. Why, I am none other than Amaori Renako. Charmed, I'm sure.

What a delightfully beautiful day, is it not? Oh, how I do so love life. Such a treasure these November days are, as autumn flees and winter's icy fingers creep in. On such a fine afternoon, as I walked along the side of the road, metaphorically skipping with glee (for I fear I cannot pull off the real thing), I contemplated my rare fortune.

My dear reader, I hear you asking, "Fortune? What the heck are you talkin' about?"

Well… (Tee hee hee)

Get this: me 'n Ajisai-san *kissed*!

A while back, that is. But I was still on cloud nine. I felt like I had found a cheat code to keep my self-esteem stat at max permanently.

Mm-hmm. I paused to smirk at a passing shiba inu out for a walk with its owner. Then I clasped my hands together and begged the powers that be: *Can I be post-Ajisai-kiss!Renako forever?*

Yeah, whatchu lookin' at, dog? You jelly?

I stopped to admire an ornamental camellia and gave it a tender smile. *You know, shrub, you're not so bad looking yourself,* I thought. *But compared to my lovely flower, the apple of my eye, my dear Ajisai-san… Oh, what am I saying? How foolish to even hint you might be equivalent! (Tee*

hee hee) Sowwy! Ell oh ell!

I twirled and danced down the street, wanting to shout *I LOVE YOU, WORLD!* the whole way. And then I arrived. At the place. Where. She. Was. Waiting. For. Me.

"Hey, what's poppin', Rena-chin? What madeja late?"

She = Kaho-chan, that is. A ticked-off Kaho-chan.

"I expected you ten friggin' minutes ago!" she snapped. "Not like it's the end of the world, but you could, like, shoot me a text if you're running behind, y'know?"

I gave my hair a dramatic *flip, flip*.

"Omg, I am *so* sorry. I got a li'l held up saying hi to a doggo and some flowers. You know how it is! You'll forgive me, right, bestie? … Right, bestie?"

"You got a lotta nerve, punk."

Kaho-chan's eyes narrowed intimidatingly. But who cared? Even if Kaho-chan got mad at me, I could still think, *Yeah, but Ajisai-san kissed me!* and carry on my merry way. Ajisai-san's kisses were worth the world. Even if I never amounted to anything, I was still guaranteed happiness. For I! Had been kissed! By Ajisai-san!

"Ugh. What are we gonna do with you?" Kaho-chan groaned. Then she turned to the vision of loveliness standing next to her. "Hey, Aa-chan. Back me up here."

That vision of loveliness—Sena Ajisai-san—said, "R-right, yeah. If you don't keep us in the loop, we get worried about you. You have to message us. Or else!"

Not the "Or else!" Oh, my bright future! Gone! Ruined! Pulverized!

But! B-b-b-but! But she had kissed me!

Yet a kiss meant nothing. For if she grew to hate me, there went

all my chances of any future kisses.

My legs wobbled. I felt the urge to bury my face in my hands. I was utter trash. My stroke of luck had made me lose sight of how lowly I really was. The kiss was a reward for working hard. Not like some log-in bonus I could get by sitting around on my ass. To win another kiss from Ajisai-san, I needed to work harder than I ever had before. And I had forgotten that! The most crucial piece of information! If I stopped working hard, she would dump me, and her kisses would go to someone else entirely. Having aimed for and earned a kiss myself, I knew better than ever how much each was worth.

I wept bitter tears. “I-I’m so sorry. I’m trying, I really am… I’ll do better next time, so please! Don’t ever leave me! I’m trying, I swear! I shwe-e-e-aaar!”

“Wh-whoa, calm down. I’m not even that mad,” said Ajisai-san.

“Girl!” Kaho-chan yelled, so loudly everyone at the entrance of the mall must have heard her. “You’re so friggin’ obnoxious!”

But I was trying not to be! I swear!

On the day our story starts, Kaho-chan, Ajisai-san, and I had plans to go shopping at the mall after school. The teacher held me back to talk, so Kaho-chan and Ajisai-san left without me. I failed to honor the time we agreed upon, wretched cur that I was. And that brings us back to the point where we left off in the narrative.

“It’s no biggie,” Kaho-chan told me. “We still had plenty of time to shop, y’know?”

By now, we were more or less shopped out and sitting in a café. There was a big grin on Kaho-chan’s face as she sipped her cocoa, her shopping bags sitting alongside Ajisai-san’s in one of the baskets the café provided for customers to put their bags in.

Ajisai-san cupped a mug of herbal tea in her hands. She smiled. “The evenings are cooling off really fast this time of year.”

These two girls—Koyanagi Kaho-chan and Sena Ajisai-san—were my classmates. Our friend group (which also included two other girls) was called the Quintet. With a name like that, you’d think we were an idol group, and honestly? That’s how people treated us.

Kaho-chan was a super cute, super outgoing, super tiny girl who always wore her hair in a half-up top knot. She had a perpetual smile as bright as the sun and more people skills than the rest of the group combined. Everyone knew her, and *everyone*, from the upperclassmen on down, adored her. She was everyone’s little sister. Kaho-chan belonged to a bajillion friend groups, and she claimed she could rack up 999 Line messages in a day. I couldn’t begin to imagine what it was like to live her life, but it seemed fun, if nothing else. But she had a big secret. When she took her contacts out, she slipped out of her bubbly girl cosplay and morphed into an anxious Debbie Downer like me. Strange but true. I thought her shy side was cute, though. I wished she wore her glasses to school every day, because then I could’ve bossed her around for a change!

As for the other girl, Sena Ajisai-san was my gir. Gi. Girlf. A person I cared for quite a bit! She was roughly my height with long, silky locks that ran down her back in light waves. Her smile had the eye-bleach power of two bazillion waddling baby penguins. She was super kind, super cute, super friendly—basically not even human. She was the angel of Ashigaya High. Unlike Kaho-chan, who was nosy as all heck, Ajisai-san was a lot more passive. She was happy to talk about whatever you suggested, which was why I stuck to her like glue. Ajisai-san was my life-supporting spacesuit in the vacuum of space called school. High school social custom demanded you buy juice for someone who does you a favor. Had I followed that law, I would have drowned her house

in orange juice. Same with Kaho-chan's, honestly.

Oh yeah, and I should mention that this beautiful, flawless being known as Ajisai-san was going out with me. I'd been her biggest fangirl from day one. And now she was dating me. It made zero sense, but who was I to question good fortune? Speaking of fortune, she had even kissed me the other day. *Heh heh heh…*

I think that was her first kiss too, which meant I was responsible for her for life. Oof. Tall order. I didn't think I was cut out for that. Facing that same possibility with Satsuki-san almost killed me, so I was pretending with all my might that I Did Not See It. It made me feel nauseous.

"I'm so sorry, Ajisai-san…" I whimpered.

"What are you apologizing for? It's perfectly okay. Just let us know next time if you're going to be late. I'm sorry. I was probably too harsh earlier."

Ajisai-san bowed to apologize for that dread "Or else!" A wave of guilt washed over me.

I mean…if I wasn't in the picture, some prince or princess would've come along and fallen in love with her at first sight. At some ball or something. Then she would've married into the royal family; become a princess beloved the world over; and dedicated her life to politics, diplomacy, world peace, and all that crap. She would've had the happiest life on the planet. And I'd robbed her of that. Me! My sole aspiration was to be nothing more than an ordinary, boring, cookie-cutter model of a teenage girl. Me! Oh, I was a sinner and a criminal.

"Rena-chin's mopin' again," Kaho-chan remarked. "Lay off her, Aa-chan."

"Huh? But I wasn't trying to be mean…" said Ajisai-san.

"Aa-chan, are you still good on time?"

“Oh, sure. My mom’s watching the kiddos today.”

“Sweet! All righty, lemme see what they got on the menu. Ooh, I might go for some cake.”

“Me too.”

As I listened to Kaho-chan and Ajisai-san twitter away, I took a minute to reboot. I had to remind myself that being the only doom-and-gloomer was a major buzzkill. I could always save it for later, once I was home alone and in bed. *Buck up, me!* I told myself. *Mental reset!*

I forced myself to brighten up just in time for Kaho-chan to pass me a menu. “Whatcha gonna get, Rena-chin?” she asked.

“Oh, uh, the chocolate cake looks good.”

“Dope. Hey, ’scuse me!”

Kaho-chan ordered for all three of us and then popped to her feet. “Sorry, gotta run to the restroom!”

“Sure thing.” I waved goodbye.

With her gone, that left just me and Ajisai-san. For some unknown reason, I felt embarrassed.

Ajisai-san looked at me with big, worried eyes. “Uh, Rena-chan…is something bothering you again?”

“Wh-who, me? Pssh, nah,” I said. “It’s nothing. Just, like, I’m so happy it’s scaring me.”

“Oh…I get it. That happens.”

Get a load of this loser, I thought to myself. *What the heck am I saying?*

“I thought…” Ajisai-san began. She broke off, then continued. “I thought my feelings for you came through, but I guess not.”

“N-no, they did! I promise!”

Ajisai-san pursed her lips (oh, those lips!) in the slightest of pouts, and I rushed to explain myself.

"I really care about you, and I know you care about me! That's why I promised I'd try my best for you. It's just…that kiss reaffirmed that I kinda need to get my shit together. It's a lot of pressure. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"I guess so. Well, as long as my message got through…I suppose it's fine."

Her smile switched on, and oh my god, it was so darn cute.

"You know," she continued, "you can always tell me if something's bothering you. Doesn't have to be a big thing either. I know you like learning about me, but you're not the only one who feels that way, Rena-chan."

"O-okay…"

So she said, but I mean… Ajisai-san was one thing, but we were talking about *me*. Me, volunteer all the things I hated about myself to my crush? Fat chance of that. Talk about attention-seeking behavior.

That's exactly why I was trying to work as hard as I possibly could. But then, if I ran into a situation where I was well and truly up a creek without a paddle… Like the time when I got sick and was no help to anyone… Well, then there was only one thing to do.

"…I…I'll lean on you when I need to," I admitted. "I guess."

"Great. Thanks."

Relief broke out across her face in the form of a smile. But then, she raised one of her fingers and started to give me a lecture.

"Oh, but if you don't feel comfortable telling me, you can always talk to Mai-chan. She seems easier to talk to in general."

"Wait, what? What makes you think that?"

“Oh, y’know. Just kinda…vibes.” Ajisai-san’s tone suggested there was no hidden meaning, but those two sentences were nothing but hidden meaning. I recoiled big time.

“No way! Mai and I are both so wrapped up in trying to respect each other’s boundaries that we can’t be open with each other about, like, anything. I literally never know how I’m supposed to act with her. And that’s *not* a good thing. You’re objectively way easier to talk to!”

“Gosh, you think?” She looked like she didn’t believe me for one second. *Don’t give me that look, Ajisai-san!* Then she nodded, brought her hands together, and smiled at me like an angel. “Well, I’ll believe it when you drop the ‘-san.’ Just like you do for Mai-chan.”

“…Wait, what?”

I goggled at her. I felt like my whole world had shifted. Like my hair dryer had started talking in the middle of using it. Like the planet of the apes had turned out to be Earth all along.

“Your name? With no honorific?”

“Y-yeah, I guess.”

I stared at her, dumbfounded, for several seconds—and then shook my head. “I’m sorry, Ajisai-san. But there’s no freaking way I can do that.”

“Oh, don’t be like that.”

“Just like elephants can’t fly, I physically can’t drop the honorific from your name.”

“Physically?” She looked alarmed, even though this thesis was formed on the logic of biological fact. “W-well, okay… Sorry, I, uh. I didn’t know it’d be such a big deal.”

“Yeah, well, it is,” I said, folding my arms. “Some things just should not be mentioned, even by you, Ajisai-san. And dropping the

honorific on your name is one of them."

In a defeated whisper, Ajisai-san said, "Oh… Okay…"

I refused to budge on this, thank you very much. Remember that time when I called her Ajisai-chan for a little sister roleplay? That was only a game, and it *still* almost killed me.

Ajisai-san tried to dispel the awkwardness. "Now that you mention it," she said in a chipper tone, "I don't know how I feel about dropping the honorific on your name either."

"Really? I'm cool with you dropping it."

Ajisai-san looked me right in the eyes and gave me her best big sisterly smile. "Renako?"

I flipped out. I would've appreciated a heads-up.

Ajisai-san extended her hand across the tabletop, still looking me square in the eye. "Want to hold hands, Renako?"

"Hrrgh."

Never had I felt such acute, overwhelming embarrassment. I was not worthy of such affection from this celestial being! It was bad enough when there was a café table between us. If she had whispered that in my ear when we were alone, the contents of my stomach would have made a guest appearance.

"A-Ajisai-san…" I groaned.

"Come on, Renako."

Her hand inched closer, begging me to take it. And then, the instant before my fingers touched her palm, she pulled hers back and giggled, her face an embarrassed red.

"Y-yeah, never mind. That's too embarrassing, huh, Rena-chan?" she said.

"T-totally."

On the outside, I gave her an embarrassed smile in return. On the inside, I heaved an enormous sigh of relief.

Oh! My! God! I really, really liked this girl! She was so, so! Mrrgh! So darn cute! God, I just freakin—gah! I liked her so much!

Kaho-chan came back from the bathroom while Ajisai-san and I were still playing blushing virgins with each other. She stopped dead in front of our table and, in a low voice, said, “Oh, some shit went down, huh?”

“Hm?” I broke out of my funk and looked up.

And. Kaho-chan. Sat. In. Ajisai-san’s. Lap.

I exploded. “Wh-wh-what?!”

Sure, girls sat on each other’s laps in class sometimes. Like as part of a bit, you know. But we were in public, and Kaho-chan was sitting in the lap of one of the Seven Wonders of the World. E-even I hadn’t gotten that privilege!

Even the vilest of rogues would have been aghast at such atrocious, uncouth behavior, so I had no doubt that Ajisai-san was most vexed. Yet all she said was, “Whoa, where’d this come from?”

“Dunno. Just kinda went with the vibes!”

Not the vibes again! Did she think that excuse was going to fly in the real world? And how come Ajisai-san didn’t mind one iota? Hello?!

“By the way,” Ajisai-san said, “do you mind if we pop by the stationery store? I forgot to pick up some things for the kiddos.”

“Nah, ’course not,” said Kaho-chan.

“How the heck are you two just carrying on a normal conversation?!” I demanded.

“Huh?” Ajisai-san’s eyes widened. Yes, yes, very cute. But I wouldn’t let her cute her way out of this.

“She’s literally sitting on your lap! What is going on here? Am I the only one who can see this or what?”

“Why’re you losin’ your mind over this, Rena-chin?” Kaho-chan asked. “I sit on her lap all the time.”

“You do?!”

Kaho-chan positioned Ajisai-san’s arms around her waist like a seat belt. Basically, she made it look like Ajisai-san was hugging her from behind. *Um, rude?! Knock it off!*

“Stop treating Ajisai-san like she’s your personal property,” I said.

“Whatcha talkin’ about, Rena-chin? I’m not forcing her. ’Sides, Aa-chan likes it.”

You could be happy to have someone on your lap, but that was for like…babies and pets and stuff. “That is some grade-A bullsh—”

Kaho-chan wagged a finger at me. “Shh shh shh. Back me up, Aa-chan.” She smiled at Ajisai-san. Their faces were mere centimeters apart.

Ajisai-san blushed slightly and nodded. “Yeah.”

Hello?! Whatever happened to that lovey-dovey thing we had going on just a few minutes ago?

Ajisai-san smiled in a chagrined sort of way, as if her family had caught her eating doughnuts in the middle of the night. “I mean,” she said, “Kaho-chan’s cute.”

I couldn’t argue that, but that wasn’t the point.

“And my little siblings are both boys, you know?” Ajisai-san went on. “They’re cute and all, but they’re *boys*. So I can’t help but find little girls cute. And she’s little. See? Check out her hands. They’re way smaller than mine. It’s kinda funny, since we’re barely five centimeters apart in height.”

“Aww, you’re gonna make me blush,” Kaho-chan said with a

devilish smirk.

They were treating me to a feast of AjiKaho content. I almost couldn't believe my eyes. But now that I thought about it…I guess I did pick up on some shipworthy vibes between the two of them at school. Which still didn't excuse this behavior!

"Oh, here comes our cake," Ajisai-san said. "I'm not sure how I can eat like this."

"I could feed you," Kaho-chan suggested.

"That could work!"

I spluttered in outrage. Was this what happened when you combined two touchy-feely girls? They carried on like this was totally normal, but Kaho-chan was getting more Ajisai-san action than I ever did!

Suddenly, Kaho-chan looked over at me. "Whatsa matter, Rena-chin? You jelly?"

"Huh? Me, jealous? No. Not at all. Really!"

"Mm-hmm," she said, like she didn't believe me. "I see. Very, very interesting. Makes sense, though! 'Cause Aa-chan's lap's reserved just for me." Her face had all the malevolence of a rich kid who walks into a shop, buys a toy another child has been begging for, and waves it in their face.

"Ohh, you're gonna get it. I can tell what you're really thinking!" I told her.

"Huh?" Ajisai-san looked alarmed, and there was a note of apology in her voice. Oh shoot. "I'm sorry, Rena-chan. Is this, uh, out of bounds?"

"Oh. Uh. Well. No. Maybe. Um."

My mind went blank. Oh, shoot, shoot, shoot. I wasn't trying to

make her feel bad! *Darn it, Kaho-chan!* I thought. *This is all your fault!*

"It's okay, Ajisai-san," I said. "I know you're not to blame. Every move you make is just and wise. We mortal men may at times be led astray by our ignorance, but I have full faith that we shall one day find a way to coexist in harmony."

"Uh, what does that mean exactly?" Ajisai-san asked.

"Rena-chin's blabbin' nonsense again." Kaho-chan stood up and stretched, sounding as detached as an alley cat yawning as it watched humanity plodding off to work and another day running the rat race.

"Anyway," she added in a perkier tone, "I'm gettin' up so you can eat."

"Thanks."

Kaho-chan returned to her original seat. When I glared at her, she tipped me a cheeky wink. That entire performance was to get under my skin. I just knew it.

She turned back to Ajisai-san and said, "You're a good big sis, y'know that?"

"Am I really?"

They resumed their ordinary, everyday conversation and began to tuck into their cake. I, meanwhile, was too on edge from what I'd just witnessed.

"You're literally amazing in every way," said Kaho-chan. "You always put your little brothers first. You're kind, you're pretty, and you're uber-duber cute. I wish I had a big sis like you."

Facts.

“You’re too nice,” Ajisai-san protested. “Besides, didn’t you mention you already have a big sister?”

“I guess. ’Cause when my dad remarried, she became my stepsister.”

Huh. I didn’t know that.

Kaho-chan mumbled around the fork in her mouth, “But, like, we don’t really talk ’n stuff, y’know? We have totally different interests. We’re still at the stage where we’re kinda working out where we stand with each other, if you know what I mean.”

“Sounds like you live with a total stranger, huh?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

I tried putting myself in Kaho-chan’s shoes, and the thought alone revolted me. Still, Kaho-chan was my exact opposite. She would probably warm up to her stepsister in no time.

“Also, I don’t think she likes me,” Kaho-chan said. “Plus, she’s hecka smart and pretty, so it’s like… It’s a whole thing.” She put a hand to her cheek and blinked a few times in what must have been an imitation of this smart, pretty stepsister. Then she snickered. “We’d have clicked in no time if she was more like Aa-chan. Or a bimbo like Rena-chin!”

“I’m a what now?!” I demanded.

This was the first time anyone had ever called me a bimbo. That word conjured a mental image of the kind of girl who went, “I could never eat an omelet! ’Cause I feel so bad for the poor baby chicky-wicky.” And that was definitely not me. Right? I wasn’t a bimbo, right? QED?

“Speaking of sisters,” Ajisai-san said, turning to me, “you and your sister seem really close.”

“We do?” For some unknown reason, I felt the need to refute that through any means necessary.

“Oh yeah,” Kaho-chan said. “She was that girl who helped us practice basketball that one time, right?”

“Mm-hmm. Her name is Haruna-chan, isn’t it? She’s very sweet. Polite, well-mannered.”

“Rena-chin, you’re shaking your head like crazy.”

“What’s that about?” Ajisai-san asked.

Polite? Well-mannered? *Whomst?* Maybe there was another Amaori family in the area with a girl named Haruna.

“I dunno, guys,” I said. “My sister’s a cheeky brat. She’s too smart for her own good, she wins every argument we have, and she always gets the upper hand against me. She’s the dagger pointed at my backside in my own family.”

“Go off, OP,” said Kaho-chan. “Spill that tea.”

“Haruna-chan is none of those things!” Ajisai-san protested.

Huh. She and I had very different perceptions of my sister. Maybe Haruna had a split personality or something.

“Well, I guess it’s hard to say nice things about your family. Right?” Ajisai-san added, ending the topic on a high note.

I wanted to expose my sister’s full list of evil traits, but I didn’t want the others to think I was that judgmental. So I magnanimously decided to spare her. My little sister should have been grateful.

Then Kaho-chan remarked, “Oh hey, we’re the only three people in the Quintet who have siblings, y’know? Mai-Mai and Saa-chan are only kiddos.”

“Huh. You’re right. You’re the baby of the family, and Ajisai-san and I are the eldest of our siblings,” I said.

Kaho-chan snickered behind her hand. “Y’know, you don’t seem like the eldest. You’re giving major younger sibling.”

“Excuse me?” I yelped. “Do I seem spoiled rotten to you?!”

Then Ajisai-san laughed too. Wait, but I was a good big sister! Right, Ajisai-chan? Right?

After that *fun*, simply *delightful* shopping trip, I headed home. Heh heh heh. Oh yes, I’d bought myself new shoes for the first time ever. Without my sister’s help! Truly, what an impressive amount of growth I’d made since turning over this new leaf. By next year, heck, I might even be ready to order Frappuccinos at Starbucks *quantum libet*. (Okay, maybe the Latin was a bit much.)

As I left the train station and walked past the park near our house, I spotted a familiar figure sitting on the swings. It was the very same girl who had featured in our earlier conversation: one Amaori Haruna. What was she doing over there? She was still in her uniform and had her backpack with her, so I assumed she was on her way home. But that made no sense. At this time of day, she should have been at sports practice. Something was wrong here. I couldn’t tell very well since I was so far away, but it looked like something upsetting had happened.

Well, well, well. How the turns had tabled.

Chuckling to myself all the while, I sauntered up to my sis and said, “Something seems to be bothering you, my dear little sister.”

“Oneechan?” She looked up at me and frowned in suspicion. “Can you quit staring at me like a freak?”

The lion, the witch, and the audacity of this b—I mean, how dare she use the slur against socially awkward people! What if I took offense and bawled my head off in public, huh? She wouldn’t like it one bit. Just watch. I’d do it!

But that was a bad idea, and I shooed it away before claiming the swing next to her. “I can guess what you’re doing here.”

“…Um, what?”

“So, picture this. You lost your house key. Your phone’s dead. You’re wallowing in misery, and then along comes your guardian angel.”

That’s me, I indicated with my thumb.

My sister stared at me for a moment and then sighed in utter disappointment, like a teacher witnessing their student bomb a test for the first time in their life.

“Oneechan, you’re an idiot.”

“Excuse me?!” It was the sincerity that ticked me off. “Keep that up, and I won’t let you in the house!”

“I have my key, you know,” she told me.

“You wha?”

“And even if I had lost it, I could still hang out at a friend’s house until Mom and Dad got home. Plus, if my phone died, they could lend me a charger.”

“Flawless logic. Was this a trap all along?”

“Oneechan, you’re an idiot.”

“Not again!” I wailed.

Whatever happened to “if you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say it at all”? Which was rich of me, since half of the reason I was here was to gloat at her. But still.

“What’s that?” my sister said, apropos of nothing.

“Huh?”

She pointed to the paper bag in my hand.

“Did you go shoe shopping? *Alone?*”

“What’s the big deal? They’re just shoes. Even I can buy shoes on my own.”

My sister gave me a look of withering scorn. “I smell a rat.”

“H-how so? There’s nothing strange about this. Shopping is easy! You just take the merchandise to the register and give them the legal tender as issued by the Bank of Japan!”

“No, it’s sus because of the brand. They’re really nice for the price, so anyone who’s anyone is buying them. Not to mention they go with every outfit. There’s no way you could have walked in and randomly landed on them out of every shoe in the store.”

The Kaho-chan in my head whipped out a placard that said, “That’s ’cause I told her what to buy” but I shooed her away with a wave of my hand.

“L-look, I know a thing or two about brands!” I said.

“Mm-hmm. You tell yourself that. Oh, whatever. It’s none of my business.”

Phew. Another close shave. Good thing I showed off my senior sister superiority. But how come I felt so empty inside? Ah, because it was a Pyrrhic victory at best.

Meanwhile, my sister went back to swinging. Her face gave away no emotion.

“I guess this means you can do your shopping alone from here on out,” she said. “One less load on my shoulders. Your whole glow-up, you made me pick out everything for you: your makeup, your hair styles, your clothes. And it’s not like I’m getting paid for this. So, good luck figuring it all out on your own.”

“You’re so mean! There’s no freaking way I could do my shopping

alone! (No ‘unless’!) My friend told me where to shop, okay?”

“Then you should’ve ’fessed up to that from the start instead of acting all smug.” She gave me a disappointed look. Whatever happened to that sweet, sweet senior sister superiority? Grr, I’d get her for this! She was supposed to be the kid sister here…

“You may think you’re cool,” I said. “But I was already walking when you were still just an egg cell. So there.”

“I hate that you have to go that far back to one-up me,” Haruna said. “That’s just pathetic.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. It *was* pathetic. I slumped forward, dejected. *Oh, it’s a hard knock life…* I lamented. *If only I could be reborn as Ajisai-san’s little sister and bask in her love and affection.*

“Ugh,” my sister said. “You’re such a pain. I’m sorry, okay? I know I went too far.”

She jumped off the swing and came over to ruffle my hair like mad.

“Now you’re just making fun of me,” I protested.

“So-rry. I was wa-a-ay out of line. You’re working sooo hard. If you’d come to me last year and said you went shopping with a friend, I wouldn’t have believed you. But look at you now, Miss Socialite. Big cheese hot-shot smarty-pants.”

She was treating me like a toddler. Not like I minded, exactly…

I looked up and met my little sister’s eyes. She put her hands on her unfairly slim hips and gave me an inquisitive look.

“What’s the matter?” she said.

“Nothing. My automatic defenses just, like, kicked in when you complimented me.”

“Ew. You’re so weird.”

“Hey!”

“Whatever, let’s just go home. I’m getting cold.”

She marched away without waiting for my input. She really thought she was free to do whatever she wanted, huh? What was she, a pirate queen?

I scurried after her, and when I caught up, she asked me, “Hey, mind if we pop by the convenience store? I want to get some ice cream.”

“I thought you said you were cold.”

“Yeah, but ice cream’s another story. Especially if you’re buying.”

“I literally just bought myself new shoes!”

“Whatever happened to senior sister superiority?”

“Fine!” I snapped back. “Fine, I’ll pay for your ice cream! Being an older sister is the worst!”

I stomped forward to walk next to my taller little sister. She giggled. Her dour mood from before had vanished entirely. This girl, I’m telling you. She’d been too cheeky and smart for her own good since day one. She won every argument and constantly had the upper hand against me. She was the dagger pointed at my back in my family. There was no need for me to worry about her. She could handle herself. Anyway, I wasn’t worried to begin with. So there!

Out of nowhere, my sister stopped short. “Oh hey, you know what?”

I walked a few more steps before I stopped too. “Hmm?”

I turned to look back at her, standing bathed in the late afternoon sun. To my big sisterly eye, nothing about her seemed *off* exactly. But she clearly had something on her mind.

She remained quiet for a moment. Then she said, “Hey, did you know your hair’s getting long? You should get it cut soon.”

“Huh? Oh yeah, I guess.”

That was weird. It was like a ball going straight before suddenly veering off in a different trajectory. It’d seemed like she was about to say something else entirely. Although, if pressed, I couldn’t explain why I thought that. It was just the vibes, as my friends said.

“Yeah, I should get it cut,” I said. “Wait. Like at a salon?”

“Yeah. You said you could go alone now, remember?” she sneered.

My heart made a painful twinge. “Didn’t I take that back? Come on, Haruna. Come with me.”

“Aww, do I have to? I’m growing mine out right now.”

“I’ll buy you two things of ice cream!”

“Hmm, I dunno. Decisions, decisions.”

She walked ahead of me, laughing, and I jogged after her to keep up.

At the time, I thought Haruna and I would be like this forever—you know, trading insults and so on. Turning over a new leaf for high school didn’t change anything in our relationship, so why would it change now?

But things didn’t turn out that way. It’s just like how hair never stops growing. Or how you can’t turn back time and undo a bad haircut. The unavoidable law of the universe says that things change. It applies to everybody, even sisters.

And that was a fact I would become keenly aware of before long.

***

I was taking my sweet time putting on my shoes—the new

sneakers I bought the other day while hanging out with Kaho-chan and Ajisai-san—when Haruna called, “Get a move on, Oneechan. I’m leaving without you.”

“Oh, okay. One sec.”

I scrambled to my feet so fast I almost pitched forward. Waaagh!

“What are you doing?” my sister asked. I managed to catch myself at the last second by grabbing on to her. That had been a close one.

“Falling. Because you rushed me,” I snapped.

“Well, no duh. It’s time for your appointment. It’s your fault you slept in until noon.”

The look on her face said *No duh*. So did her mouth, funnily enough. Looked like we had a visitor from the planet of *No duh* over here…

“We have a lot to do today,” she continued, “so pick those feet up and march. First, we’re hitting the salon.”

“Right.”

I followed my sister on sleepy feet as she powerwalked down the road. Our usual salon was a bit of a hike to get to. The first time my sister took me there, I remembered thinking, “Taking the train just to get a haircut? Girl, what in the…”

My sister usually had sports practice on the weekend, but not today. Therefore, she had a Lot to Get Done. Believe it or not, my sister was in the bizarre habit of getting up at 7 a.m. on weekends, so my mother woke me up at the same time for breakfast. (Mind you, I fell back asleep afterward. Hence why we were only getting out the door now.)

As I stumbled along, I asked Haruna, “Why were you up so early today?”

“Do you even have to ask? I went running, like I always do. The ordinary thing.”

“I’m pretty sure getting up to go running doesn’t count as an ordinary thing…”

“Then I had a shower, helped Mom make breakfast, did some homework, went with Mom to the dry cleaners, watched some videos, and made lunch.”

I shuddered in horror. What honest, clean living. Too clean for my tastes! “Don’t tell me you’re going to publish one of those life coach essay books.”

“Uh, no? That’s not my definition of an ordinary weekend thing.”

“Ordinary, ordinary, ordinary,” I grumbled. “Everything’s always *ordinary* with you. It’s because the world’s got people like you in it that it’s so gosh darn hard to be *ordinary*! You keep raising the bar. I wish you’d realize what a hardworking superhuman you are.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” My sister looked confused.

No! That was me being mean and nasty!

This hair salon was in vogue with all of Haruna’s friends. Apparently, every outgoing people person had her own favorite salon. (Coulda fooled me.) Once I thought about it, it made sense. I struggled to play FPS games without my mouse. Same kind of deal.

My sister switched on the personality she adopted around other people and said, “Hey there!” to the girl working the salon counter.

“Hey, Haruna-chan! Oh, and Oneesan. Nice to see you guys.”

“N-nice to see you too,” I said.

Yeah, they called me Haruna’s oneesan here. I was my sister’s accessory and nothing more—a set of free earbuds that came with your

new phone. Which I liked. It let me relax.

"Your stylist will be here soon," the salon lady told us. "Why don't you put your things in the locker?"

I did as she said and then sat down on the couch next to Haruna.

"What're we doing for you today, Haruna-chan?" the salon lady asked.

"Oh, just a trim for my bangs," my sister said. "To keep things neat while I grow my hair out."

She sounded bright and bubbly, the image of every sporty girl ever. As always, she wanted to make a good impression, so she masked her real, evil self. I had to hand it to her; it was a good disguise. She even had Ajisai-san fooled.

A couple minutes later, the stylist who always did my hair came over.

"YaaAASS, look who it is! Gurl!!! It's so good to see you."

Oh god. Here she was.

"Th-thanks for squeezing me in," I said, bobbing my head as a polite gesture. Try as I might to imitate my sister, my voice was the only cheery thing about me.

"Where have you been? You look so good??? Broke. My. Scale."

My stylist took being a girly girl to horrifying extremes. Her hair was blonde with pink tips. She had that flashy makeup, those skinny jeans, one of those crop tops that left her belly button on full display. She scared the crap out of me.

"So. WHAT are we doing for you today, queen? You wanna go for something young and cute? You feeling a more mature look? Oooh, or we could get the scizzies and chop it all off. Whaddya think? Chopper time?"

“Um. Uh. Well.”

What the heck was chopper time? The only Chopper I knew was Tony Tony One Piece. Girly girls were big into peace, right? Or, well, peace signs. But you know what I mean.

Oh, why, oh why, did I have to be saddled with this stylist? My sister asked if I wanted a particular stylist when she booked the appointment, and I was like “Nah.” Was my lack of response the cause of my current plight? What if it was my first time here, for crying out loud? How could I have asked for anyone in particular?

Wait a minute. I had my phone with me. I had notes on my phone to tell me what to say. It was a genius move, if I did say so myself. Besides, I couldn’t keep relying on my sister forever.

“Um, can I get? Um,” I began.

“Ooh, what if we hooked you up with some fun col-*urrs*. Yes! A balayage? Gurl, you would slay so hard. How’s your school’s dress code? Are they, like, super stricter-richter?”

“Are they—wha? Bala…huh?”

“Oh my god, we have to try it. It would look so. Cute. On you. Like it’s not very high contrast? TOTES natural. Ooh, ooh, ooh. What if we lightened your hair? With no bleach. It would POP. Hot girl summer, here we come!”

The force of her smile was threatening. Did you catch any of that, reader? Because I sure as heck didn’t.

As I was unable to think and speak at the same time, I fell into an awkward silence. A horrible cold sweat began to creep down my back. Why was she treating me like one of the Popular Girl 9000s who made up the rest of the shop’s clientele? Couldn’t she tone herself down a bit? Maybe meet me at my level? I felt like I was building an avatar in a character creator. “With over eighteen hair styles to choose from!”-

lookin'-ass. Maybe that was desirable if you were a YouTuber, but it wasn't to me!

Just then, my sister cut in to save me from my panic. "You don't need to do anything fancy," she said. "You can just give her the usual."

"You got it, bestie," said the girly girl stylist. She made the okay emoji with her fingers in a cheerful show of compliance.

Oh, thank god. I shot my sister a look of gratitude, but she never once looked my way. Instead, she and the stylist kept up a rapid stream of chatter. Whatever. Who needed her? I was safe, and that was what mattered.

"POV: You're on your way to a major slay moment!" said the stylist.

"Uh. Thanks?"

Phew. We were now past the bit where I needed to do anything. From here on, all I had to do was sit back, relax, and let the haircut run its course. I didn't mind the sensation of people cutting my hair, so I decided to close my eyes and let myself get comfy…

Until the stylist went, "So, Oneechan-chan. You gotta spill. How's school goin'?"

"Huh?"

Alas, it was now conversation time. The true hell was only beginning!

"Next up: clothes shopping. Ready, Oneechan? …Oneechan? Earth to Oneechan."

"Oh. Uh. Yeah. Sure," I wheezed.

When we stepped out of the salon, I had a beautiful new haircut, but my facial muscles were dead.

“Why do they *talk* like that at beauty salons?” I groaned. “If only we could bring back the Tower of Babel and destroy the language of hair stylists.”

“What are you going on about?”

My sister shot me a withering glare. Eep.

“I’m just saying. Having to carry on a conversation when you’re a captive audience? That’s cruel and unusual punishment.”

“You’re literally the only person in the world who thinks that,” my sister informed me.

“Nuh-uh!” Much to my sister’s ignorance, I had tons of compatriots. Mostly online, and…yeah, okay, they were all online.

“I don’t have any talking power left in me,” I said. “I’m holding on by my fingernails here.”

“Sounds like a you problem.”

My sister and I made our way over to the arcade shopping street near the train station. Our mission? Get ourselves some winter clothes.

“Wait a minute,” my sister said. “You’re the one who wants new clothes. So why didn’t you and your friends go the other day?”

“Uh. Well. About that.”

I looked away. This anxiety was another on the long list of fears my sister would never understand. But so be it. Resigned to my fate, I admitted, “I’m too embarrassed to go clothes shopping with my friends.”

“Wait, why?”

“It’s like being put on trial for my taste in clothes.”

My sister gave me an even more perplexed look. Because I was so nice to the apprentices of anxiety, the newbies of nerves, I broke it down into language she could comprehend.

“Okay, look. It’s like this. When you go buy clothes with your friends, you’re basically proving you have a good sense of style. If I pick out something utterly hideous, my whole friend group is gonna be like, ‘Oh my god LOL no no no you can’t I’M DYING is that a joke? HELP’ and then for every other article of clothing I pick, they’ll be like, ‘omg, don’t say anything to her TEE HEE HEE’ and then they’ll bully me for the rest of my life. And then I’ll die.”

“Oh my god,” my sister said. “You are so friggin’ obnoxious.”

Wha—Kaho-chan, was that you?

“You are,” my sister continued, “*literally* the only person in the entire world who thinks that.”

“No, I swear, there are lots of other people just like me! Online, that is!”

That’s why I just had Kaho-chan refer me to a store and then picked my shoes out on my own. I wasn’t about to let anyone watch me.

But that wasn’t all.

“And what if my friends ask me my opinions on their clothes?” I asked. “I don’t even know what I think about *my* clothes, so how the heck could I judge other people’s? Sure, all my friends are nice folks. But I keep thinking they’ll look at me and go, ‘She’s no fashion disaster. She’s a fashion apocalypse LMAOOO!’ And I would rather die than let that happen!”

“Do you enjoy living like this, or what?” my sister asked.

And she really meant it too.

Honestly? I didn’t know. There were a lot of sucky bits. Maybe more than the good bits. But…

“I guess so,” I said. “Things’ve been…really nice lately.”

“Really? Well, good for you.” My sister patted my shoulder.

“So before they find out that I have no fashion sense whatsoever, I need you to bequeath your sense of style to me,” I said.

“The nerve.” She laughed at me. “Don’t you already look over my fashion magazines?”

“Kinda…”

“How do you ‘kinda’ look over a magazine?”

“I read them,” I clarified, “but it’s not like any of it sinks in. The models are all pretty people, you know? Anything looks good on you when you’re pretty enough.”

“Okay, edgelord. Put the cynicism away.”

“Ugggh.”

“First, you need to decide what kind of clothes you’re into,” Haruna explained. “Like do you go for cute things? More casual looks? High fashion? And then, once you figure out what style to follow, you go learn about what’s in vogue for that look. Once you’ve got that down, you can focus on accessorizing, swapping colors, playing with fit… This is all going in one ear and out the other, isn’t it?”

I shriveled into a desiccated corpse by way of response. My sister smirked.

“Here, the next time I’m free, I’ll teach you how to really read those magazines,” she said. “And we can do a face match.”

“A what now?”

“It’s an app. It finds a celebrity who looks just like you. It’s not super accurate since it doesn’t take physique or bone structure into account, but it does let you get a pretty good idea about what stuff would look good on you.”

“Wow, I didn’t know they had things like that,” I said. “Wait, am I literally the last person on Earth to find out?”

“Dunno, don’t care.” My sister sighed and shrugged. “Y’know, it’s not the worst thing in the world to be ignorant. So long as you’re willing to learn, there’s no harm in tackling one thing at a time. That’s how you handled your glow-up. You put in enough effort, and now look at you. You finally have friends.”

“Okay, fine…I’ll put in Effort. If I must.”

“Good. Thank you for cooperating.”

That’s supposed to be my line, I huffed to myself. Whenever my sister cooperated, she would actually lay stuff out for me. Like, in a straightforward way. That was why I could never afford to lose her.

“It’s the classic carrot and stick technique,” I muttered to myself. “That’s how they getcha.”

My sister beamed at me, oh-so innocently. “What if we skipped the carrot?”

“What if we skipped the stick?”

“Sure. Only for the low, low price of 2,000 yen an hour.”

“Hello?!”

“If I give you an inch, Oneechan, you’ll take a mile.”

The Satsuki-san in my head nodded and said, “I wholeheartedly agree.” I could never let the two of them meet. They would be a pairing from hell.

“Oh yeah? You think you’re so hot?” I spat back in frustration. “Well, you—you—you know nothing about me! So there!”

My sister ignored me and walked right on into the clothes store. Great, now I looked like a weirdo on the streets yelling at air. *Way to pull the rug out from under me, Sis*.

Before we headed home, I bought my sister a couple slices of cake

as thanks for taking me shopping. She looked happy, with that lighthearted grin on her face, as we walked along in the late afternoon light.

"I never knew you were a comedian," she teased. "You had me in stitches back there."

"For the tenth time," I said, "I'm still nowhere ready to ask retail workers for help."

Both of my hands were full of shopping bags. For some mysterious reason, some of them were my sister's. A mystery, indeed. Maybe because I was the eldest—or, well, eldest in name only…

"I keep telling you, your social anxiety's ruining your life," my sister said. "You don't even need to read fashion mags. Just go into a shop, find one of the people who works there, and ask 'em what's hip. Store clerks know everything about fashion. Be casual about it. Just, like, say, 'Which of these two would look better on me?'"

"But what if they lie to me just to offload some of their old stock?"

"Why do you always assume the worst of people?"

Again, an honest question.

You know what's weird? My people person little sister believed that everyone had good intentions while I, the shy recluse, had the worldly experience to think the worst of people. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around?

My sister sighed. "Whatever. You're a mess. You spent a whole day shopping, but you still have a long way to go before you're ready to graduate from People School 101."

"Sorry for being a D student…"

"You're just too darn shy. That's your only issue."

I couldn't even "eep" at that. There was no point in trying to hide

around my sister. She knew me inside and out. No matter how many friends—or girlfriends—I got, there was only one person in my whole family—hell, the whole world—that I could be totally, a hundred percent honest with. My sister.

The interclass athletics competition taught me that, sometimes, you needed to be brave enough to let other people think bad things about you. Even so, that didn't mean I was comfortable with the idea. I didn't want other people to see me the way I was deep down: a cynical, doom-and-gloom misanthrope. I think that was why I needed my sister. Well. *Maybe* I needed her.

Just then, my sister stopped a few paces ahead of me and turned around. "Huh?" she said. "Oneechan, why are you walking funny?"

"Huh?" My heart rose in my throat. "I'm not walking funny."

She ignored me and circled around behind me. "Are your shoes too loose? When did that start?"

"Uh…"

I looked away in an attempt to dodge the question, but that trick didn't work on my sister.

"When?" she demanded.

"…When we left the café."

Truth was, those new shoes hurt like heck. For a while, I managed to act like everything was all hunky-dory, but in the end, I still got found out.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Haruna said. She put her hands on her hips and gave me a look that radiated disappointment.

"I'd really rather not say…"

"Why?"

"Because you know. These were the first shoes I ever bought on

my own…”

My sister looked at me in confusion for a few seconds before she finally put two and two together. “Ahh. What, you think I’m going to make fun of you? Just because you messed up on your first attempt to buy yourself shoes? Do you think I’m gonna be like, ‘You really can’t do anything on your own, huh?’”

I groaned and hung my head in shame. My hands balled into fists. And the fact that my feet hurt like hell was the garbage icing on top of this crap cake. This was the exact reason I didn’t want her to find out!

“You’re so stupid,” Haruna said.

“Hey!” I snapped, but when I lifted my head to yell at her, I saw her crouched down in front of me with her back turned toward me.

“Get on,” she said.

“What?”

“We’re almost home, so I’ll carry you the rest of the way.”

“Wha…” I blinked a couple times. “Wait, what? I’m the older one!”

“Yeah, and I’m buffer. Got ’em.”

“What does that have to do with anything?!”

“Oh, shut up,” said my sister. “Your feet hurt, don’t they? So get on. It’s not like anyone’s watching. Hurry up, I don’t have all day.”

“You’re just going to try and get free ice cream out of me later,” I protested.

“No, I won’t!”

“You promise? Cross your heart and hope to die?”

“Yes! God, you’re so stubborn.”

She glared at me to shut me up, so I finally gave in and climbed

onto her back.

"Oh, goddamn it…" I muttered to myself, now resigned to my fate. I hooked the shopping bags through the crook of my arms.

My sister's head swiveled around. "You mean, thank you?"

"Thank you…"

"That was the least thankful thank you I've ever heard," she mumbled under her breath.

Then she started for home with me on her back. Her pace was steady, unlike my roiling emotions. She acted like it was nothing to be the only thing holding up the full weight of a whole other person.

"Aren't I heavy?" I asked.

"Nah. Besides, I've carried classmates to the nurse's office when they've twisted their ankles and stuff."

"Are you sure? Like, really, really sure? Because I've gained some weight again recently."

"Yeah, I can tell. You know what? You're really heavy. Uggh, so heavy. Pushing two hundred kilos heavy."

"You little brat!"

I wanted to whack her on the back of the head, see how she liked it! But that was beyond rude when she was she being my ride, so I let my anger fester inside of me instead. I tried pinching my upper arm to vent the emotions, but that didn't help. All it did was make me feel even worse.

“Hey, Oneechan?” said my sister.

“What now?”

“Are you happy these days?”

It took me a minute to answer her. I knew what I’d said earlier, but…

“Yeah,” I finally answered. “Life’s on the upswing.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that.”

I couldn’t see the look on her face as she said that, and I didn’t know what had prompted such a question.

“You know what, Haruna?” I said.

“Hm?”

“…You’ve sure grown up a lot.”

The conversation stopped for a minute. I don’t know what prompted it, but something about that moment reminded me of a time when we were little.

But just as I started to go down memory lane, I felt Haruna shake with laughter against me. “I dunno about that one, chief,” she said.

In another minute, we were home. I put disinfectant on my blister, slapped on a bandage, and took a bath.

Then, a day later, shit hit the fan.

After breakfast, I went back to my room to grab my backpack and bumped into my sister in the hallway.

“Oh, uh…hey,” I said.

“What’s up?”

“You know, about yesterday… Well, I just wanna say thanks.”

I felt embarrassed as heck, but thanking her was the least I could

do. So I looked everywhere but at her face and made myself spit it out.

My sister tilted her head in confusion. For a minute, I thought she had no idea what I was talking about. Then she said, “Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.”

Um, rude? That took a lot of courage, okay? Don’t *it’s nothing* me, missy! Sure, outgoing people like her might have led such rich lives that they could shrug off such a favor, but I was an introvert to the core. This would stick with me for life. For a second, I contemplated telling her that to prove my point, but that’s when it hit me—oh yeah, ever since I turned over a new leaf, I was an extrovert too!

I decided to be the bigger person. I had things to do. Y’know. School. But just as I started walking away, something hit me. Haruna was *still in her pajamas*. My sister practiced the baffling custom known as morning training, so she always left the house before I did. So…what was up with the PJs?

“Wait, do you not have practice today?” I asked her.

My sister stopped dead.

I was her older sister, so I felt like I’d know if there was anything off about her. But there wasn’t. She was her ordinary self. My totally ordinary sister looked back over her shoulder at me and said, “Nah. That’s not it.” And then, in perfectly cheerful tones, she admitted:

“I’m not going to school anymore.”

You could have knocked me over with a feather.

My sister, on the other hand, walked away as casually as if she hadn’t just dropped a bombshell on me. Before I could freak out, she turned back for a second to say, “Now get going, you’re going to be

late," and shooed me out the door.

It took me a full three seconds to reboot before I could shout at the top of my lungs, "Wait, what? Hello?!"

Chapter 1:
There's No Freaking Way My Mental Health Can Handle This!

SINCE DAY ONE, Amaori Haruna just *had* it. Like, she took one look at something and it clicked for her. Back when we were little and got caught playing way past our bedtime, she was always crafty enough to look sorry. Like a good little girl. Guess who got told off twice as much, since I was older and supposed to know better?

And from that moment on, there was no looking back. She was great at everything. From the moment she started junior high, her athletic ability turned her into the star of the badminton team. She made it to tournaments at the…well, not the prefecture level, since we were in Tokyo. I dunno what you'd call that. The city level? She made it to that. And even though she ran herself ragged with hours of daily practice, she still got great grades.

So what tanked her mental health? Why did she stop going to school? If my little sister was the type who didn't have any friends, couldn't meet anyone's eye, and clung to my sleeve sniveling and whimpering "Oneechan…" that would have been one thing. That would've been kinda cute, actually. But my sister was the polar opposite. She had tons of friends. I mean, duh. She was friendly and bright, and she wasn't scared of anyone or anybody. Her badminton gave her great legs and a toned body. Not to mention, she was taller than me now! Worst of all, she was way, way more fashionable than me. *And* much prettier. Come to think of it, a good half of my mental hangups could be attributed to her. I'd lived my entire life being compared to someone who was both younger and better than me! Like, what the hell, man?

…Honestly, it was pretty impressive that my mental health had held up as well as it had, what with living with her for so long. Maybe I was the better sister this whole time. Or at least better when it came to sucking.

See, Amaori Haruna was such a fantastic little sister that I couldn't stand her one bit.

I rolled out of bed when my alarm went off and slouched to the bathroom, where I struggled to tame my mess of bedhead and sluggishly brush my teeth. It was quiet this morning. More quiet than usual. Normally about this time, my little sister would have already been ready to go and yet still would have been fighting me for the bathroom. (For what it's worth, I usually lost that fight.) But today I had the bathroom all to myself.

I didn't know why, but I felt uneasy. As I walked back to my room, I happened to glance at the door to my sister's bedroom. I hesitated, then sighed and opened it a crack. When I peeped in, I saw a lump in the bedsheets. She was still asleep. If she didn't get moving soon, she'd be late for school. She must have been serious about this no school thing.

I closed the door. Now I felt even weirder. I didn't want to deal with the fuss of asking my mom what was going on with Haruna, so I slipped past her and out the door.

"I'm leaving!" I called.

"Have a good day at school!" my mom yelled back, but I was already on my way.

It was only then that the obvious thought hit me:

This shouldn't be possible. My little sister can't be too depressed to go to school. I mean, she's Haruna. But that's what's happening. Isn't it?

I didn't have plans with any of my friends that day, so I hurried right home from school. When I stepped inside, I called, "Hey, I'm home!" I wasn't *worried* worried, but you know.

My sister's shoes sat in the foyer. *Well, no shit, Sherlock.* She hadn't gone to school today; where else would they be? But this made it feel real.

I gave myself a minute to decompress and ditch my backpack in my room. Just as I was about to venture back out into the main house, there was a knock on my door.

"Hey, Oneechan?"

"Hm?"

My sister opened the door and peeked her head in. She was wearing casual loungewear and a noticeable absence of any unhappiness on her face. *Seriously? Skipping school like it's NBD?* I thought to myself. There's ballsy, and then there's whatever the heck this was.

She held her hand out. "Let me borrow one of your games."

"Huh? My video games?"

"Yeah, to pass the time. You never realize how long a day is until you're stuck at home all day, you know?"

"Uh…"

As I waffled, my sister came all the way in. She looked over my beloved video game collection with the same face one would adopt when dragged along on a friend's shopping spree for something one had no interest in.

"I don't know what any of these are," she said. "What do you have that's fresh?"

"You sound like a sushi shop regular."

I refused to get up off my desk chair and join her. For someone sitting in her own bedroom, I couldn't shake an inexplicable feeling of unease.

"Hey, I didn't get around to asking this yesterday…" I began.

"What's that?"

"Uh…why aren't you going to school?"

My sister fixed me with a long stare. Eep.

"Is that any of your business?" she asked.

"I-I guess not. But still."

She was so cold! It was like grabbing a block of ice with both hands. Every part of me wanted to abort mission and end the conversation there. But I didn't.

"Y-you know, you're gonna freak out Mom if you keep this up," I told her.

"Said the pot to the kettle."

You know what? That was fair. As an ex-truant and depressed recluse myself, maybe it was time to throw in the towel.

"Just because you're going to school *now*," my sister said, "doesn't mean you can pretend it never happened. I'm sure you don't want to go dredging up those bad memories either."

"Urgh… Yeah, but still…"

"Just leave me alone."

My sister shooed me away with a flap of her hands, all but telling me she was done with this conversation. Thank god. But at the same time, what was I supposed to do now?

"So, are any of these any fun?" my sister said, turning back to the games.

Somehow, I found myself going along with her. “I think all of them are pretty fun…”

“You think? What, does it feel good to shoot people with guns?”

“Once you start, there’s no going back,” I told her.

“Cringe.”

What, I was just being honest! But she looked at me like I was some kind of criminal. I guess my sister was one of those people who couldn’t tell the difference between fiction and reality.

“Which one’s the best?” she asked.

“I dunno. Let me think.” I put my hand to my chin and went over to take a better look. Which *was* the best? The ultimate question, really.

My sister knew nothing about games, so there was no point in giving her a detailed explanation filled with lots of gamer lingo. That would just have been showboating on my part. All she wanted was for me to pick one and go, “Here, this is the best out of all of them.” Look at me, mastering the art of self-control.

Feeling pretty darn pleased with myself, I said, “This FPS offers online play for up to three players. It’s great fun, but as it’s been out for so long, the community has developed a complicated meta that presents a high barrier of entry to newcomers. Conversely, this title is so new that it has a very active playerbase and promises a fantastic gameplay experience. However, beware the balance; the devs clearly have some more work to put in. Still, I have high hopes for this game after the next patch. It has some great onboarding, and I recommend jumping in while the hype is still fresh. Some hardcore gamers may be turned off by the child-friendly graphics, but this is truly a classic FPS and a worthy addition to every fan of the genre’s library.”

The moment I finished, I buried my face in my hands. Why. Why, why, why. I thought I’d grown out of that. But the minute anyone asked

me about games, all my understanding of appropriate social customs went right out the window. I became a one-woman blabbermouth and info dumper. I was a fool.

But my sister went “Huh.” Like she was actually listening. “Okay. I’ve seen that online, so I’m down to give it a shot. Where’s the thingy you play it on?”

“You mean, the console? It’s right there. Give me a sec.”

I unplugged it from my TV and brought it to my sister’s room. Her room was a lot girlier than mine. For starters, she had so many clothes they couldn’t all fit in the closet. There were hanger racks everywhere. The bookshelf on her desk had a bunch of books about badminton, and everywhere you looked, you’d see plushies of this chonky little wolf dude. He was her favorite character.

Huh. I hadn’t been in my sister’s room for some time, come to think of it. Not since summer break, when all her friends were here. My sister barged into my room whenever she needed me, but I basically never went into hers.

After I plugged the console into her PC monitor—I don’t know why she even had a PC; she barely used it—the screen flickered to life. I made a new account and passed my sister the controller.

“How do I play this?” she asked.

“Start with the tutorial, I guess.”

I sat next to her and showed her the controls. My sister *had* touched a video game or three in her life, so she picked it up pretty quickly. It reminded me of teaching Satsuki-san to play that one game.

“Okay, I get it,” my sister said. “So now I do a 4v4 team game, right?”

“Yup, exactly.”

“Everyone’s gonna have to carry me, though. They’re probably going to get mad at me.”

“Yeah, it’s good mental training,” I told her. “The more you play, the better your fortitude. Pretty soon, nothing will faze you.”

“Said the girl who’s fazed by everything.”

Well. Couldn’t argue that one. Maybe I was better off shutting up.

Just then, I noticed a couple of bandages on my sister’s right hand.

“Did you hurt yourself?” I asked.

“Yeah, kinda,” she said. “It’s just a scrape.”

Huh. Okay. I decided not to press the issue and turned my attention to the game. She charged into casual match after casual match, and every time she did, the expression on her face morphed into a closer approximation of a frown.

“I’m not hitting anything,” she complained.

“You should switch to one of the beginner-friendly weapons.”

“But this one’s cute!”

“Then I fear you have no choice but to obtain the skill to back up your conviction, grasshopper,” I said, stating the blatantly obvious.

My sister gave me a Look. What was that for?

“Like you’re so cool,” she said. “I’d like to see you do better. Can you walk your talk?”

“I’ll walk *your* talk!”

I yanked the controller out of her hands and pulled up the settings. Once I had my usual setup, it was on. She crossed the line, and it was time to show her what I was made of.

I charged into battle, armed with that stupid gun she insisted on using. Within moments, my sister began oohing and aahing in

spellbound admiration of my miraculous feats of video gaming wrought from hours of diligent training. *Heh heh heh*. How'd she like these apples, huh?

"I've never seen you in the zone when you're playing one of these gun games," my sister said. "I had no idea…that you could be such a creep."

"What was that?!"

If I'd sucked at it, she would have been like, "Called it." But because I kicked major butt, she insulted me! There was no winning with this girl. Seriously, what was I supposed to do?

Before long, the timer beeped, and the match was up. I brandished my pointer finger at the score table and my double-digit kill count. And, since my sister wasn't giving it the attention it deserved, I grabbed my phone and texted her a bajillion pictures of the screen. So there!

"Okay, okay, I get it already!" she said. "Yes, you're amazing. Alert the media!"

I *flip, flipped* my hair a few times, put her wack-ass settings back, and handed her the controller. "If you keep it up, you'll be playing just like me in no time," I said. "Maybe. If you're lucky. Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration, you know? Good luck, champ."

"Can you literally shut up?"

My sister gritted her teeth, vexed at the poignancy of this quotation from one Amaori Edison Renako. *Ahh.* Now that was what I liked to see.

Satisfied that I'd flaunted my senior sister superiority, I stood up. "Give it your best shot. If you get bored, I've got other games you can try."

“Mmrgh,” she grumbled. “I’ll stick with this one for a little longer. Thanks for playing with me, I guess.”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Any time.”

Just before I crossed the threshold, I looked back at my sister sitting on the floor in a cross-legged slouch. She leaned in toward the screen, a cushion in her arms. Then she noticed me watching her and turned to look at me.

“What’s up?” she said.

She blinked at me a couple of times with those beautiful big eyes. Her long hair was silky smooth and as neat as the day she came home from the hair salon. Her skin was great; her figure was better. She was gorgeous. The definition of a girl who had everything.

I shook my head. “Nothing. See you,” I said.

I closed the door behind me and sighed. Ultimately, that cleared up nothing. I didn’t know how to address the elephant in the room with my sister. All that? That was just me showing off my gamer prowess. But this wasn’t the time for one-upping her. God, I could not have been worse at social interactions.

I felt gross inside. I dragged myself back to my room, feeling like I was fleeing a dungeon without finding so much as a treasure chest.

Remember when I said earlier that my sister just, like, picked things up quickly? That’s true, but if you were to ask me, her biggest asset was her, well, “perfect example of a typical human being” vibe. She must have gotten that from Mom. She always knew what was right and wrong, and whenever I opened my big mouth and blurted out some weird stuff, she had no hesitation in calling me out. I’d been getting stung by truth bullets, courtesy of my judgmental little sis, for years now. It was like living in a beehive.

But at the same time, she also taught me a lot. Especially about social norms. Like there was a time she told me, “Hey, you know what? You need to say thank you when someone does you a favor, no matter how small. Otherwise, even if they like you a lot, there’s gonna be a little voice at the back of their mind going, ‘Damn. What was the point if she doesn’t even care?’” That was one of many special lessons she gave me during my makeover from sucky to social. She always started with “Hey, you know what?” She chastised me a lot. But, admittedly, she also taught me a lot of really valuable things about social interactions. Most of which had sunk in by now.

See, even if my sister had been totally run-of-the-mill and talentless, she would still have that *typicality*. I would have respected her mightily just for that. But she had a buttload of talent on top of that. And she kept rubbing that in my face, the jerk.

But that’s what convinced me that something was wrong. She was clearly trying to avoid acknowledging some big, unknown issue. And that’s just not how my sister rolled.

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She would go back to school today, right? She had to. Or maybe tomorrow. That mantra rolled through my mind for a good three days, but my sister continued to show no sign of wanting to go back to school.

Granted, she wasn’t just holing up in her room all day. She still showed up for dinner and did her chores and stuff. My parents kept telling her they were here if she wanted to talk, but that didn’t get a peep out of her. Every time I heard one of those conversations, I felt an ache in the pit of my stomach. I knew how much stress a depressed truant could introduce into a household because, oh yeah, I’d done it

first! I knew my sister wasn't trying to open old wounds, but that didn't make it any easier on me. My mental health took a nosedive. I felt like I couldn't catch a break.

***

Four cheerful girls sat out on the cafeteria terrace enjoying lunch. Oh yeah. And then there was me. The not-so-cheerful one. The whole gang was back together for lunch for the first time in ages.

"O. M. G!" Kaho-chan squealed. "Mai-Mai, what is *that*?"

"I'm afraid my servants were busy today," Oduka Mai said with a dazzling grin. "So I booked a delivery from a catering service instead. I'm afraid I can't eat all of it—my work, you know—so I would dearly appreciate it if you helped me finish this lovely meal."

This literal model and beauty queen was none other than the unshakable pillar of the Quintet. She had astounding grades, superb athletic ability, a drop of French blood, and a mother who was company president of apparel brand Queen Rose. I could list all of her achievements, but that'd fill an entire essay. It's enough to say she was too darn dazzling for her own good. Here at Ashigaya High, we called her the super darling—like, the English words "super darling"—or "supadari" for short. Guys and girls alike idolized her, and if she ever started dating anyone, we all knew it'd be on the front page of Yahoo News. Yeah, and speaking of dating… Ha ha…

"Renako? Is something the matter?" Mai said. She looked at me. This girl, too gorgeous to be real, looked at me. I involuntarily stiffened when I felt those big blue eyes boring into my soul. It might have been a good six-plus months since we'd first met, but I still hadn't gotten over how gorgeous she was. Heck, I'd probably go to my grave without ever

getting over it.

"Y-yeah?" I said.

"You don't need to look so frightened. I was only wondering if you're quite all right."

Mai worrying about me made me stiffen for a whole other reason.

I knew why she asked. It wasn't rocket science. Something *was* the matter, but I was torn about opening up. Family emergencies weren't a topic for casual conversation.

Just then, the girl with long black hair sitting next to me spoke up. "I'm sorry, could you remind me? Who died and appointed you the responsibility of helping every upset person on the planet Earth?"

Mai shrugged. "No one, I should hope. Wouldn't such a role be a challenge? There's only one of me, compared to the whole planet. I merely speak up when the one facing such mental turmoil is someone I care about dearly. Say, Renako or you, Satsuki."

Satsuki needed a moment before she could respond. "Yes, I do seem to recall a time when I was horrified over the ending of an otherwise good book. What was it you offered again? Oh, I remember. Buy us both plane tickets and drag me to the Library of Alexandria?"

"Now that you mention it, I recall this incident as well. You love libraries, so I presumed it would be just the thing for you."

"Yes. And ever since, I've had to keep my guard up. I can never show any sign of unhappiness when I'm around you. Oduka Mai, would you care to provide a comment on that statement?"

"Why, I'm glad you're always so happy." Mai beamed at her.

Satsuki-san's book whistled past her head.

Here I interjected, "Please stop, Satsuki-san. Please stop brandishing your book at her. You're scaring me."

The person currently trying to beat Mai to death with a book was Koto Satsuki-san. Her long, straight black hair sailed behind her as she swung. If Mai was a beauty in motion, then Satsuki-san was a beauty in stillness. Mai was grand and welcoming with her smiles and her words, which made her seem friendly.

But Satsuki-san was different. Satsuki-san was one hundred percent pure grace. Everything—her rigid expressions, the fierce light in her almond-shaped eyes, and her impeccably guarded demeanor—came together to make the picture of elegance. If she'd existed thousands of years ago, her beauty could have been the downfall of the Shang dynasty. But for all her frigid perfection, she had a heart of gold. She doted on her mother like nobody's business. Not to mention she declared me her ***one and only bestie for life***. We may have had one or two teensy-weensy slipups, but we were definitely kindred spirits whose mutual platonic affection would last an eternity. Really, Satsuki-san liked me so much I didn't know what to do with her. That silly girl!

"Amaori, what on earth is going through your mind right now?" the silly girl asked me.

"Can't a person think about whatever she wants? What's that called again? Free will?"

If looks could kill, hers would've done me in. I withered under that sniper-fire glare. Satsuki-san was so perceptive I swore she could read minds. If someone gave her an ESP test, she'd get a perfect score.

Anyway, yeah, that's Mai and Satsuki-san. They, Kaho-chan, Ajisai-san, and a random NPC extra made up the friend group that was Ashigaya High's Class 1-A's pride and joy: the Quintet.

Ajisai-san shot me a worried look. "Rena-chan, is something wrong?"

"Uh. Well. About that."

All eyes turned on me. I had a lot of history with these four girls, and I wouldn't trade them for the world. Plus, they also cared about me. Kinda. I think. But that didn't make all the attention any easier to handle!

Still, I had made progress. I could immediately think up a way out of this awkward sitch: make a snappy one-liner so they'd forget all about the problem! A great plan, except…I didn't have any one-liners in me, snappy or otherwise! Which left me with only one other option: zip my lip to keep things from getting even more awkward.

So I did. I sat there in silence. And…so did everyone else. What the heck? Why were things getting *more* awkward? Why didn't anyone start talking again? This wasn't how things normally went! I sucked at playing social situations by ear, so I always followed a script and chose the quote-unquote right answer. Less draining on my MP that way, you know? But there was no script now, and I had no idea what to do.

Satsuki-san saw me fighting for my life and remarked offhand, "No doubt we all have our secrets. We shouldn't force her to speak if she doesn't want to."

Oh, Satsuki-san! Thank you so much! I sobbed mentally. It hit different when it came from someone who was nothing *but* secrets! (I meant that as a compliment.)

"Yeah, I getcha," Kaho-chan said. She joined Satsuki-san and finally moved the conversation along, dispelling that weird tension. "So y'know, the other day—"

I breathed a blatant sigh of relief. Bullet dodged. Or…well. Partially dodged.

Because I failed to notice the last two members of my friend group were deadly silent and wore matching conflicted frowns.

That afternoon, Mai hit me with a rare, “Do you want to go home together, Renako?”

“Hm? Sure, sounds good to me,” I said.

“Lovely. I’ll arrange for the car.”

Oduka Mai never made the invitations. It was unheard of.

At any other time, I would have thanked her for her most gracious offer but regretfully declined, but after the interclass competition, I was known as the one and only girl who called Oduka-san “Mai” to her face. I didn’t know how that sat with other people. Like, did they think I had the right to do that? Did I *still* have that right? I wasn’t sure, and not knowing kinda freaked me out. I didn’t want to get carried away and have mean girls drag me out behind the school building for a bullying.

In all but a whisper, I said, “Th-thanks, Oduka-san.”

Mai frowned. “Why are you acting so distant?”

“Urgh. Um… Th-thanks, Mai.”

“You’re very welcome.” Mai beamed at me.

The limo pulled up near the school in its usual spot, and Mai and I climbed in. Sure enough, Mai’s personal helper and manager, Hanatori, occupied the driver’s seat. She was a diehard Mai × Satsu shipper and revered Mai like a goddess. Totally gorgeous too. Not to mention a *mean* masseuse.

Hanatori-san and I already knew each other (and I don’t mean in the Biblical way), so I gave her a friendly hello and a “Thanks for picking me up today.”

“You’re welcome.” Hanatori-san bobbed her head in acknowledgment.

Wow, it felt like we were actually open and cordial with one another! I knew she just wanted Mai to be happy. That’s why she wasn’t

a fan of our relationship. But…she must have realized I wasn't stringing Mai along, and this was her way of acknowledging that. One of these days, she might even say, "But of course! It's my pleasure, Amaori-san."

But until then, I'd have to keep my secret well hidden. You know, the secret that starts with an A and ends with a jisai-san. If she found out, Hanatori-san would go to jail under Penal Code Article 199. Oh, but that was just a joke, right? Ah ha. Ha. Ha…

Just then, I realized there was someone already in the limo. Wait. What?

"Heya!" said the limo's previous occupant, offering me a wave and a cute grin. It was none other than the resident angel, Sena Ajisai. What was she doing here?

Mai said, "Let's be off, Hanatori-san."

"As you wish, mistress."

Wait a minute! Now all three of us kids were sitting side by side in the backseat. What was going on?

"I apologize for the confusion," Mai said to me in a low voice. "We're simply worried about you."

"Uh-huh," Ajisai-san chimed in, just as quiet. "You looked really upset at lunch, Rena-chan."

They were both so kind I felt like I could cry from happiness. But see, the problem was… Eep. I felt a cold stare on me.

"We realized during the interclass competition that you're the sort to bottle things up," Mai said.

"That's right. So Mai-chan and I got together, and we decided we should ask you one more time. Remember, Rena-chan, we care about you. We're both your g—"

A garbled scream burst from my throat, making both Mai and

Ajisai-chan stare at me in shock. Hanatori-san shot me a look through the rearview mirror. All I could see was a small quirk of an unamused eyebrow, but beyond that, I couldn't tell what she was thinking. Either way, this was not the place for me to let my guard down.

"R-right!" I said. "You're both my…great friends! Wow, I'm the luckiest person alive to have friends like you. Makes me so happy I just…screamed! Yeah!" I forced myself to laugh.

See, Ajisai-san, Mai, and I were all dating. Not that this was a problem in and of itself. I mean, it wasn't ideal! It was kind of a mess. But, like, the dating part was chill. You get what I'm saying. We all decided on it together, and so we at least had a common agreement.

No, the problem was the person driving the car at this very moment—Hanatori-san. She cared about nothing except for Mai's happiness, and she'd once declared that if she ever got wind of anyone two-timing Mai, that person would be dead meat. Of course, that was only a hypothetical situation. As if there could ever be anyone who'd date Mai and, ha, another person at the same time? Get real!

Except, welp, here I was.

"Wh-whatever you say, Rena-chan," said Ajiisai-san. "You're a great friend to me too, of course."

"Absolutely," Mai added. "And we both swore we'd be here to help carry your burdens, didn't we?"

Oh god, what was I supposed to do now? With my life on the line like this, their words were not making the slightest bit of impact on me.

"So if anything's making you upset…" Ajisai-chan continued.

"Yes, if anything is troubling you, you should tell us."

I fake laughed again. "W-wow, thanks! Gosh, you two are so nice to me I just can't stop, uh, sweating! Boy, am I one lucky duck."

I needed to (by some massive luck) prevent the word “girlfriend” popping up so Hanatori-san wouldn’t find out. That was the only way I’d make it through this conversation alive. The problem was, I didn’t know if I had the chops to do it. But if I didn’t, I’d be a Renakorpse, so my only option was to try!

Just then, Hanatori-san said, “My apologies, mistress, but might I interrupt your conversation?”

My heart about flew out of my mouth.

“Yes? What is it, Hanatori-san?” Mai said.

Oh god, oh god, oh god. I could hear it already: “Mistress, is this girl dating you and this other girl at the same time?” Then I’d go full aggro and be like, “Yeah, and? Whatcha gonna do about it? Listen up, sweet cheeks. If you kill me, Mai’ll be beside herself! Got that?” I couldn’t imagine Mai and Ajisai-san liking me after *that*. No, no, a thousand times no.

But Hanatori-san asked, “Which young lady am I dropping off first?”

“Oh, I suppose we didn’t say,” Mai mused. “Would you please take Ajisai home?”

“As you wish. Thank you, mistress.” Hanatori bobbed her head in polite acknowledgment and, with a smile still plastered on her face, shot me another look. Eep.

“Rena-chan?” Ajisai-san said. “You look deathly pale.”

“D-do I?” I said. “You must be imagining things.”

I forced myself to make a smile that didn’t reach my eyes. At this rate, I thought, I’d go gray by the end of the car ride.

Mai and Ajisai-san exchanged a quick look with one another.

“I guess she doesn’t want to open up to us,” Ajisai-san said.

“I fear you’re right. I had hoped we could help, but perhaps we’re simply being too nosy,” said Mai.

That wasn’t it. Really. None of the people here had done anything wrong. Well, maybe I had. Maybe my wish to obtain happiness was the underlying problem. Oh, whatever. I had to bite the bullet and get it over with. This wasn’t the kind of secret to take to the grave.

So I said, “No, that’s not it! It’s just. Um. My sister’s stopped going to school for mental health reasons!”

“Haruna-kun has?” Mai asked.

“But why?” said Ajisai-san. Both she and Mai turned pale. Oh shoot. They knew my sister. Like, as acquaintances!

“She didn’t tell me why,” I said. “It’s, uh, it’s kinda complicated. I get why it’d be hard for her to open up to me about it.”

Out of all my friends, only Satsuki-san knew I wasn’t inherently a chipper-dipper outgoing sort. But even then, I hadn’t told a soul about my own hooky days.

Mai looked concerned. “Perhaps it’s something that’s hard to talk about with her family.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ajisai-san agreed. “No wonder you’ve been so upset.”

She looked devastated on my behalf. *I’m sorry, Ajisai-san,* I thought. Clamming up like this was just a survival instinct.

“She hasn’t gone to school for a whole three days now,” I said. “I’m pretty darn worried, as you can probably imagine.”

That certainly wasn’t a lie. I was worried about my sister’s well-being too, but I also felt like I was looking back at my junior high self every time I bumped into her. I wished she’d tell me what was going on. Maybe there was something I could do to help. Not very likely, mind

you, but it was technically within the realm of possibility.

"Hmm," Mai said. "What if I were to talk to Haruna-kun?"

"Huh?"

Ajisai-san clapped her hands in an "Ah-ha!" gesture. "That's a great idea."

"I-I dunno, guys," I said. I started to go glassy-eyed from panic, but the conversation continued on without me.

"Yeah, yeah," said Ajisai-san. "If we all showed up at Rena-chan's house together, we might scare Haruna-chan. What if we each went to visit her one at a time?"

"A fantastic plan. Let's do just that."

I finally discovered a lull in their dialogue and thrust myself into it frantically. "You, uh, don't have to go that far. Not for my sister."

"But…" Ajisai-san, the kindest person on earth, faltered. "It's not just because she's your sister. I mean, that's part of it. But I also talk to Haruna-chan on her own, you know? She feels like a kouhai to me. If one of my kouhais is struggling with something she can't tell anyone, well…I want to be a listening ear for her, you know?"

"Ajisai-san…"

Mai, the most socially graceful person on earth, smiled and chimed in too. "I couldn't have said it better myself. Well, what do you think, Renako? Would your sister mind if we offered an additional shoulder or two to cry on?"

Since they were offering, I mean…

I shook my head. "Not at all. That'd be huge."

There was no freaking way my sister would talk to me, but maybe there was hope for Ajisai-san and Mai. Hope. A brilliance as bright as the sun. No matter what complex personal topic froze your heart solid,

these two could melt the ice and let you get everything off your chest. At least, way better than I could!

Then Ajisai-san said, “Hey, Rena-chan. Um…do you mind if we shared this with Satsuki-chan and Kaho-chan? I know they were really worried about you this afternoon.”

It was sweet of her to say that, but I just didn’t know, man. I hemmed and hawed internally.

Mai laid a hand over mine. “Where’s the harm in talking? You know Satsuki and Kaho won’t take it poorly.”

She said it so kindly that I felt like agreeing with her. I felt my own ice melting too.

“I-if it’s not too much of a bother…” I said.

“Of course not,” said Mai.

“Not at all!” Ajisai-san agreed. She took my other hand in hers.

They were both so, so kind to me. And it wasn’t just because I was dating them. It’s because they were people with beautiful hearts.

Honestly, I was damn lucky to make the friends I had in high school. They were the kind of people I wanted to meet again in my next life.

Welp. I’d just have to do my best to survive that long, and for *that*, I needed to make sure Hanatori-san never found out. Actually, you know what? If I explained it to her, woman to woman, maybe she would understand. Maybe Hanatori-san wasn’t such a bad person after all. The way she talked was terrifying, and she glared like nobody’s business. But that had simply fooled me into thinking she was worse than she was. Maybe she would be forgiving about the whole two-timing thing. After all, she worked for Mai, and look how forgiving Mai was. That had to have rubbed off on her. Just like how Mai rubbed off on me.

Mai smiled. “After all, once you and I get married, Haruna-kun will be my little sister too. Why, she’s practically family already.”

I yelped, and my eyes bugged out of my sockets. I knew she was joking, but like. Come on.

“W-wow, Mai-chan, that’s bold,” Ajisai-san said. “Get a room, you two.” She made a show of fanning herself.

Mai chuckled. “Are you not in the same boat, Ajisai?”

Uhhhhhhh.

“Me?” Ajisai-san said. “I’ve never, uh… I’ve never thought that far ahead.” She fidgeted and blushed before shooting me a glance out of the corner of her eye.

Hey now. Mai × Satsu fangirl number one was listening.

But Hanatori-san made no comment and continued driving. Did this mean I was in the clear? Yeah, I was, right? Mai was blatant as heck, but not Ajisai-san. You wouldn’t have been able to tell I was dating both unless you knew already. Right? Right?!

Hanatori-san said nothing when we dropped off Ajisai-san. And she didn’t speak up when we got to my house either. Not a word. That definitely meant I was in the clear, right? I felt like I was jumping at shadows. I couldn’t just ask her, “Hey, did you just find out that I’m two-timing Mai?” so I had to no choice but to suppress the urge to leap at every hint of darkness conjured up by my guilty conscience. Which was exhausting, let me tell you!

The next day, my friends gave me an opportunity to talk about my little sister’s situation. Every one of them, even Satsuki-san and Kaho-chan, offered to help. Man, did I have the best friends ever or what?

All the while, the Hanatori-san in my head advanced on me with a

chainsaw, whispering, “You would think spending so much time around such nice folks would make you a better person. So why are you still like that?” Ugh! Begone, mental Hanatori-sans! I spammed the delete key.

Fortunately, that turned out to be the end of this particular Hanatori-san nightmare. But I knew it was only a matter of time until a second or third came along…

Oh, shut up, I told myself. *Now’s the time to focus on my sister.*

***

“Ready to go, Rena-chan?” Ajisai-san asked me with a big smile.

“Uh-huh.”

God, she was so cute. Cuteness incarnate.

Anyway, four beautiful girls had come together with the mission of rescuing one Amaori Haruna. Step one: Ajisai-san gracing our humble home with her presence this afternoon. Mai offered to go first, but alas, she had too much work. Her schedule wouldn’t open up for another week.

Now, I said step one, but I didn’t anticipate us needing any more steps after that. Ajisai-san was a much better big sister than me. She’d mop the floor with my baby sis. Heh heh heh.

Wait, how come the instant Ajisai-san and I were alone together, she went totally quiet? What was that about? Seriously, the whole time we were at the train station and on the train itself, Ajisai-san didn’t say a word. I kept sneaking glances at her, but weirdly enough, she never met my eye. Uh, hello?

“Are you nervous, Ajisai-san?” I asked. Because I was nervous!

Or wait a minute… Oh no. A very frightening possibility just occurred to me. Maybe Hanatori-san had cornered her and subjected her to questioning. Maybe Ajisai-san would turn to me and say, “I’m really sorry, Rena-chan. Hanatori-san’s set an assassin after you. I don’t think you stand a chance, but good luck, I guess? Lololol.” Or had I unwittingly done something rude and hurt Ajisai-san’s feelings? Oh no! There were just too many likely possibilities!

Just then, Ajisai-san jolted. “Oops, I’m sorry,” she said. “I was kind of spacing out there.”

“Oh, was that all it was? Whew. So it’s not my fault? I didn’t accidentally say anything so out of pocket you wanted to stop being friends with me, right? Man, for a minute there, I was worried.”

“Rena-chan, I wouldn’t stop being friends with you just for a single slipup,” Ajisai-san said, bringing me back down to earth once again. Ah, she was so grounding. If she grounded me any harder, I’d have to start calling her Mom.

“Or anyone,” she added. “I don’t get mad that easily.”

“Ahh, a second helping. Thank you, Mom, I couldn’t eat another bite.”

“Uh, what?” She seemed genuinely baffled at my show of appreciation for her welcome rain of grounding comments. *Don’t worry about it, Ajisai-san. I’m just basking in this pleasant feeling.*

Ajisai-san laced her fingers together and said, “Hey, you know what?” Cute af.

“What’s up?”

“You know… This is kind of embarrassing, but I should probably bring it up.”

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened her mouth again. She

was obviously trying to make up her mind. It was really darn cute.

I realized that I trusted her enough to know she wouldn't deliver some scathing criticism. Well…I mean, did I? Really, really? We all know how much I sucked. I was terrified she'd say something hellish. Like, "You know, I think we should go our separate ways after all. If people see us together, they might start a nasty rumor that we're *friends*."

"I was hoping to bring this up once we were alone," she said. "I, uh, feel bad about my behavior the other day."

I was stunned into silence. What other day? What was she talking about? The day Hanatori-san took us home in the limo? Lunch the other day? Or some time way before that? My life flashed before my eyes, but I could not find a single instance of bad behavior on Ajisai-san's part.

The train passed through a whole stop before I finally shook my head and said, "Uh, I don't *think* you did anything…wrong…?"

"O-oh, really?" She looked discomfited. Maybe it was the delay in my response. "I mean, it wasn't a nice thing, though. I shouldn't have let another girl stick herself all over me right in front of you."

"Wait, what?"

"After all…I'm your girlfriend, Rena-chan." Ajisai-san turned bright red.

I opened my mouth, and absolutely nothing came out. The G-word rattled my skull. Now I remembered. The day we went shoe shopping. Kaho-chan sat on Ajisai-san's lap, and Ajisai-san hugged her from behind. That's what Ajisai-san was referring to.

Wait, wait, wait. Back up a bit. Did this mean she'd been worried ever since? About my feelings? Ajisai-san? Worried about me?! It was almost like she cared about me or something!

“Wait, no!” I said, flapping my hands in refusal. “I didn’t mind at all.”

“You looked spitting mad, though…”

Not at Ajisai-san. I was just making that face because Kaho-chan was trying to flex on me. Duh! Sure, maybe I was kind of annoyed, but at Kaho-chan and Kaho-chan only.

Okay, I needed to calm down. I took a sec to get my words in order. “Just so you know, I’ve never been mad at you for hanging out with other people. No matter who! I always think, ‘Gosh, she’s so popular,’ and that’s it.”

“…R-really? You never get a little…uh, jealous?”

“Me, jealous? Pfft! Nah!” I declared, in my best attempt to cheer her up. “Why would I be jealous? People can touch you all they want, and I’d never think twice about it. Jealous? Not in a million years!”

Ajisai-san looked horrified. What for?! “O-oh. Okay. I see.”

“Yeah! I mean, everyone loves you, right? You’re the angel of Ashigaya High. I can’t try to hog you all to myself.”

“Right…”

The more I tried to amp her up, the more she wilted. *Satsuki-san, help me!* I thought. My hand gravitated to my phone, but I knew that leaving Ajisai-san to call Satsuki-san would lock me into a bad ending. So I forced myself to ignore my phone. I needed to cheer Ajisai-san up some way, any way! All on my lonesome!

“Um. Uh. Ajisai-san? You, uh. You look really cute today…?” I tried. Nope. My voice came out so thin I sounded like a mosquito.

She giggled and flashed me double peace signs, but it didn’t look natural. “Wow…thanks. You sure, uh…always put a smile on my face.”

Whew. I guess I pulled that off someh—actually, I don’t think I did

at all. Because she was clearly faking it!

"I'm sorry, Ajisai-san!" I said. "To be real with you, I don't have a clue what's going on!"

"R-Rena-chan?"

I completely gave up and bowed to her. If we hadn't been on the train, I would have groveled on the ground in front of her. As horribly brazen as it was, I needed answers.

"Did you…want me to be jealous?" I asked.

Ajisai-san bit her lip. "Mmmm*mmm*…?" She looked like she was trying to hold back a hiccup. Then she looked away and started mumbling, "W-well, I guess I did bring this up. As e-embarrassing as it is, you won't know unless I tell you…out right…"

Then she made up her mind, looked at me, and nodded. "I-if you're not jealous at all, I feel, just…a *little* unappreciated."

"Oh…"

"Y-yeah."

Okay, got it. So she would've been happier had I been kinda jealous. "All right. I'll do my best. Time to be jealous."

"Y-you don't have to force yourself."

"No, I have to! I promised to try my best, remember? So I'm going to try my best at being jealous! Grr, I wish I was your uniform! How come it gets to stick to your chest and I don't, huh? The nerve!"

"That's not at all what I meant, though!"

Oh, really? Guess I was going down the wrong track. And now Ajisai-san was telling me off… God, I really couldn't do anything right.

"Okay, so what's your version of jealousy?" I asked her. "Can you give me an example?"

“Huh?!” She turned even redder. “A-an example…? Oh gosh. Uh, I dunno…”

“I mean, I have no idea what you want from me! So I want to learn. I’ll get some books on psychology and read those!”

“You can’t learn jealousy from a book.” Ajisai-san grimaced for a few moments and then very, very quietly said, “J-just as a theoretical example…it’s like if I saw you and Satsuki-san talking…just, you know, theoretically…and I started to wonder what you guys were talking about, and…you know.”

Her faltering, and entirely theoretical, explanation gave me a light bulb moment. “Oh, I get it. That’s what you mean by jealousy. That makes sense!”

“J-just so you know, I made that up! It’s not real!” she insisted.

I smiled at her brightly, the way my little sister taught me. “Don’t worry, I get it. Everyone loves you, remember? You’re the angel of Ashigaya High. It’s okay! I know I’m nothing but a Joe Schmoe, so I can do whatever I want and you’ll never, ever feel jealous of me. Not in a million years!”

Ajisai-san pouted and slapped me on the shoulder. Uh, what was that for? Hello?!

During the rest of the trip, I did my darndest to find out what was bothering her, and I was exhausted by the time I got home. But I needed to pick myself back up and put my game face on. As impressive as Ajisai-san was, I couldn’t foist the entire sister-saving operation onto her. To make sure their talk went well, I needed to put in effort too. Hwah!

So I beelined to the door of my sister’s room, knocked, and opened it before she could answer. “I-I’m home,” I stuttered out.

“Welcome hom—hm?” She was in the middle of a game, but when she glanced over and saw the pretty girl standing next to me, her eyes widened in shock. “Ajisai-senpai?”

“Hi.” Ajisai-san bowed.

Faced with such impeccable manners from someone her senior, my sister threw down the controller and scrambled to make us welcome. But she was still in the middle of a match! I snatched up the controller. Whew, that was a close one. By the time I finished wrapping up the game for her, I found that my sister had cleaned up, made a place for Ajisai-san to sit, and put down a cushion for her. She was fast! Must have been all that badminton.

“Thanks,” said Ajisai-san.

“Not at all!”

Ajisai-san sat down. There was no place for me to sit, so I went to my room and brought back one of my own cushions before I joined Ajisai-san.

“So, what’s Ajisai-senpai doing here?” my sister asked me.

“She came over to see you,” I said.

“Me?” My sister was confused.

I signaled Ajisai-san with my eyes. Have at it, senpai. Help this poor girl remember the warmth of humanity and unfreeze her frigid heart.

“Well, you see,” Ajisai-san began, putting her hands together. She gave my sister a smile that would have put anyone at ease. Perfect! She was nailing this! “Haruna-chan, I hear you haven’t been to school lately.”

“Ohhh. Yeah, not really.” My sister made an “Ohhh. That old thing. Right,” face. “Sorry, Ajisai-senpai. Oneechan must have put you

up to this, huh? You didn't need to come all this way to see me."

"No, no. You're my kouhai, Haruna-chan. I just wanted to offer my help. Is there anything I can do?"

Oh my god, she was such an angel. With all the light shining off of Ajisai-san, I half expected hearts to appear in my sister's eyes. Next thing you knew, she would cry, "I'm off to school at once!" and dash out of the room.

Except she didn't. She said, "Uh, not really. Nothing's going on." Like it was self-explanatory. What the heck?

"But you're not attending school at the moment, are you?" Ajisai-san said. It was a gentle question, probing but still concerned for Haruna's feelings.

"Yeah. And no one can make me go."

"Right. So, you must have a good reason for saying that."

My sister put a hand to her chin in thought. "I dunno. If anything, why do I have to go to school in the first place?"

What the?

Ajisai-san was just as taken aback. "What do you mean, why?"

"Sure, the law says you need to graduate from junior high. But it's up to the kids if they actually attend class, you know? It's not like anyone's going to drag me to my desk."

"Uh…"

"And I really don't want to go to school right now. Why does it matter? Is it that big of a deal?"

Ajisai-san was visibly baffled. "If you don't want to go, I don't think anyone can force you. But still…"

Ajisai-san couldn't talk over her and yell "Because I said so!" Ajisai-san was the kind of person who'd listen and help you work out

your problems. But how could she do that if my sister wouldn't talk?

"If you at least tell me what's going on, I might be able to help you," Ajisai-san said.

Yeah, at least keep us in the loop, you know? But my sister shook her head in a way that brooked no argument.

"I just don't feel like it. There's nothing you can do."

"A-are you sure?" Ajisai-san asked.

Hey, uh, guys? Things weren't looking so hot here.

My sister nodded, her face serious. "I'm sorry, but it's true. I hate to send you away after you were nice enough to come visit me, but there's absolutely nothing you can do."

"O-okay. If you say so."

Ajisai-san was a pro at being considerate of people's feelings. And she heard my sister loud and clear.

My sister switched topics. "How about we play a game, Ajisai-senpai? I'm getting pretty good!"

She sounded so animated it stumped Ajisai-san. Ajisai-san turned back over her shoulder and looked at me, but *I* didn't know what to say either. I just nodded. What else was I going to do?

That's how the two of them ended up in a match together, with Ajisai-san's original goal left unachieved. Still, if my sister was willing to play with us, maybe that meant she was opening up to us a little bit. I had to believe that.

Man. Since when had my little sister been so stubborn?

Once I walked Ajisai-san to the train station and said goodbye to her, I heaved a sigh. To be real, I thought she would have cleared this whole mess up with a snap of her fingers. I must have been too

optimistic.

Before she left, Ajisai-san gave me a worried smile. “She probably just needs a bit more time.”

This was one of those bosses you couldn’t one-shot, even using the cheat code known as Ajisai-san. My freaking little sister… She almost made it seem like I was just using and abusing Ajisai-san’s kindness. *The* Ajisai-san! Yes, that one!

Oh well. I figured I’d better go home instead of stewing about this here.

Just then, I thought *Hm?* Because I noticed the weirdest thing: right at the end of the train station stairs. Right there, smack dab on the asphalt. Was a girl *hunched up in a ball on the ground*.

I involuntarily squeaked in surprise. I mean, there was a girl crouching on the pavement! And not in the sense of, like, loitering in front of a convenience store or anything! Was she sick? Oh god, what was I supposed to do?

I ran over to her, panicking all the way. Oh god, oh no, oh god, oh no.

And then the girl looked up. *Eep.* Our eyes met.

Of all the odd things, she had silver hair. She clearly wasn’t Japanese, especially considering how pale she was. Normally, pretty girls didn’t faze me—pretty girls were a dime a dozen in the Quintet. But this girl was just objectively gorgeous. She also had this whole regal, dignified vibe to her…which was kinda mitigated by the way she was squatting on the ground. Still, when she looked up at me like this, I couldn’t possibly ignore her and go on my way. Not unless I wanted to regret it for the rest of my life.

I summoned all my courage and the will to speak. “Um. Uh.” Oh god, what did we say in English class again? “Mei ai herupu yuu?”

She stared at me blankly. Big time blankness up in here. Then, in a completely level-headed tone, she said in Japanese, “Hello. Nice to meet you.”

“Wait, what?! Uh, hi,” I said.

She sounded completely chill, like we were meeting for a hangout. And not, you know, sitting in the middle of a busy walkway. The girl continued to hug her knees and looked up at me with eyes like a doll’s. She asked me, “Are you a bad person?”

“God, I certainly don’t think so! But come to think of it, I’m not exactly a saint either.”

“Oh, good.” The girl stood up. Holy crap. I hadn’t been able to tell when she was sitting down ’cause her face was so small, but she was taller than me. She was maybe of similar height to Mai or Satsuki-san. And then in terms of her age…I mean, I couldn’t tell all that well since she wasn’t Japanese. But I gathered from her general attitude that she was probably a high schooler or thereabouts. She also gave off this totally otherworldly aura.

“Let’s go,” she said.

“Uh. To where?”

“To Lucie’s home.”

Uh… Who was Lucie? Was she talking about herself? I asked carefully, like I was trying to speak a foreign language, “Who is Lucie? Are you Lucie-san?”

The girl—Lucie-san—nodded.

“C-cool. My name’s Amaori Renako.”

“That is nice, Renako-chan,” she said.

Was I doing it? Were we communicating?

“L-Lucie-san, where is it you’d like to go?”

“Home,” she said.

“Uh, did you forget the way? Is that it?”

Lucie-san lit up so brightly she glowed like a lamp. Aggh! Not my one weakness, the bright smiles of pretty girls!

“Yes, Renako-sama!”

“Wait, I’m on a ‘-sama’ basis now?!”

“I knew you were a good person,” she said. “Take me home.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I put up both hands like I was trying to stop a big dog from flinging herself on me. “Hold on a sec. I don’t know where you live!”

No sooner did I say that than Lucie-san (Lucie-chan?) dug around in her pocket and pulled out a note. “I live here,” she said. “Do you recognize it?”

The note had a simple map showing the route between her place and the station. Urgh. Alas, maps without a “You are here” marker tended to give me grief. But when Lucie-chan was looking at me with

the trusting eyes of a kindergartner, I couldn't up and be like, "LOL nope!"

"Hey, wait a sec," I said. "There's an address written on the back."

Oh, thank god. And since I'd lived here my entire life, I could find her place, easy!

"Renako-sama?" Lucie-chan prompted.

"Okke, okke," I said, showing off more of my English. "So long as I have an address, I can show you the way home. C'mon, let's go."

"My hero!" she cried, and she hugged me tight. I yelped. I felt like I was being crushed in the arms of a bear that had grown too used to humans.

"Wh-whoa, hold on!" I said. "Let's all calm down, okay? There's no need for any 'hero' business. Just call me Renako."

"Renako-sama!"

"Nooo… Okay, you know what? If that's as good as it gets, then we'll stick with that."

I gave in and started to set off. But just then, Lucie-chan stuck her hand out for me to take. It was almost a little *too* natural of a gesture. Oh well. I guess, if I had to… She probably felt scared, being lost in a place she didn't know.

I took her hand, and off we went. I felt like I had a toddler on a leash.

"Lucie-chan, are you, uh, from another country? Did you come to Japan recently?"

"Yes," she said.

"Wow. You're really good at Japanese."

"I've been here on vacation many times. But now I live here."

Cool. She must have moved here, which must have been tough with her limited vocabulary. If someone had dumped me in the middle of the U.S. and left me there, I'd stand no freaking chance of ever getting by. Even a vacation there would've been too much for me.

"By the way," I said, "those things are called police boxes. If you ever get lost again, they can give you directions. They're really nice about it."

"Who is 'they?' Renako-sama?"

"Huh? I mean, I *can* help if I happen to bump into you, but…"

I was about to add that this was because I had nothing better to do, but I usually didn't have this much time in my schedule. Yet before I could, she lunged at me again, cried, "Renako-sama!" and hugged me. Whoa, whoa, whoa! This girl needed to work on her boundaries!

"But I won't always be here! The police have much better availability than me."

"What days and times are you available?"

"You can't just ask that!"

Not in this day and age, when we all had phones! But I gave her a rough estimate anyway, based on the times I went to and from school. That seemed to satisfy Lucie-chan.

"Okay," she said. "If I need help, I will wait at the train station at those times."

"What are you, a stalker?"

Lucie-chan was definitely an odd bird, so I didn't want to give her easy access to me. But my conscience ate at me.

Finally, I gave up and pulled my phone out of my pocket. "Here, let me give you my number… Do you have a phone?"

"Yes."

I looked her up and down. She clearly had nothing on her.

"I have a phone," she repeated.

Maybe she meant she had one at home. Well, that explained how she got lost.

"Ah. Okay," I said. "I guess I'll give it to you next time I bump into you. Or something, I dunno."

"Okay."

The expression on her face was all but inscrutable, but I *think* she was happy.

You know what? This prompted a trip down memory lane. I always had trouble cutting ties with kids like her. Not, like *bad* kids or anything. But you know. The ones who were kinda weird. That always ended up biting me in the ass, but it wasn't like they ever meant me any harm. You know what I'm saying? And believe me, I knew perfectly well that I had my own fair share of quirks. So hello pot, meet kettle.

Man, people who spoke their mind really were something else. Couldn't be me.

"If you just moved here and you don't know anybody, what do you do all day?" I asked her.

"I work."

"You're kidding me. You work already? Like, as an adult?"

She had to be pulling my leg, right? A girl like this, who couldn't even make it home from the train station without curling up into a ball? If a girl like that could find a job, what the heck was my excuse? (Yes, I knew this was rude.)

"After work, I play a game at home," she added.

My eyes snapped wide open. Because then she listed off the name of a game that was going viral the world over. Coincidentally, it was my

favorite game at the moment.

"W-wait, you play that one too?" I asked her. "Are you, uh, ranked?"

"Platinum."

"Dude, same!" I got so excited I squeezed her hand. "Awesome. I can't believe I stumbled across someone else who plays the same game. Seriously, this rules. Ooh, you gotta tell me. Who's your main?"

"I change depending on the map and my party. But my top characters are…"

From there, we had a grand old time gabbing about games. Well. *I* had a grand old time. I kind of talked at her. But who cares? I was sure she enjoyed herself too.

Whenever I talked about my hobbies, it was always kinda touch and go. I didn't know how hard to throw the conversational ball or what lengths people would go to catch it. You know? Yet no matter how hard I lobbed it, Lucie-chan matched me stride for stride.

"Dude, the way they keep messing with the balance is so wack. You know what I'm saying? They completely nerfed my favorite character in that last patch! Now I barely want to use them. Maybe they just want us to try out all the characters, but if so, that's not the way to go! You feel me?"

"Yes. I was sad when my main was nerfed. They are no longer the meta, but I can still make them work for me."

"Seriously?"

As my excitement grew, my motormouth kicked in. But that never seemed to give Lucie the ick. She kept right on talking to me.

We were having the time of our lives when I looked up, and—

"Hey, wait a sec. Is this your house?"

“Yes.”

I had to crane my neck so far it hurt to take in the entire place. It was a huge, towering apartment complex. The kind of fancy joint with a concierge at the front desk.

“You live in some swanky digs,” I told her.

“Yes. I live so high up I can’t get domed from snipers on the ground,” she said with a proud giggle. Domed, meaning shot in the head. It’s a shooter game thing. She said it so casually, like only a gamer would.

“Goodbye, Renako-sama,” she said. “Thank you for everything. I must pay you back someday.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” I said. “I had fun hanging out with you.”

Lucie-chan bowed to me deeply. Her silver hair swayed and flickered in the afternoon sun, like a clamshell on the bottom of the river reflecting the sunlight.

“See you again?” I offered.

“Absolutely.”

Just then, Lucie-chan raised her head—she must have remembered something, judging by the look on her face—and darted forward. I didn’t know what she was doing until she grabbed me and hugged me tight. Oh god!

Lucie-chan whispered in my ear, “Thank you so much. *Merci du fond du cœur*.”

“Come again?” I stiffened involuntarily as those unfamiliar words washed over me.

She let me go, bowed once more, and trotted into the apartment building. I clamped my hands over my fiery-red ears and muttered to

myself, “Uh…what was that language?”

My heart galloped like a racehorse.

I would only discover the significance of my meeting with Lucie-chan the mystery girl much, much later.

Chapter 2:
There's No Freaking Way It's All up to Me! Or Is There?

I WAS MINDING MY OWN BUSINESS, walking down the hall at school when a peppy voice sang my name. "Ren-a-ko-kuuun!"

"Huh?" I said, turning around to find a girl from Class B skipping up to me. This was Terusawa Youko-chan. We met at the interclass athletics competition. Ahem. "Met."

"Are you heading home?" she asked.

"Yup. Sure am."

Youko-chan still seemed interested in me even now that the competition was over. Couldn't have told you why, really. But it felt nice to have a friend (someone I knew? Idk) in another class. If something happened and I ended up dropping into Class B, at least I wouldn't be totally alone. The more people you knew at school, the better. Strength in numbers and all that.

"Are you? Then guess what?" Youko-chan clapped her hands together and gave me the most adorable, inquisitive look. Ugh. The lethal blow only pretty girls could get away with. The puppy-dog eyes! Kaho-chan used this bad boy with reckless abandon.

"I'm going to hang out with some friends of mine today," she said. "Wanna tag along?"

"…With you? And your friends?"

"Uh-huh!" She beamed.

The Amaori Renako that lived in my head put on a pair of specs and scoffed. "Youko-chan's friends are nothing but total strangers masquerading as friends of a friend. Why would you ever hang out with

strangers? What's she thinking, asking such a stupid question?"

Nope! I couldn't cause a rift in our friendship! I thought I'd swept most of my trauma under the rug, but I guess I still sucked at turning down invites with a solid no. I just didn't want anyone to hate me, you know?

While I hesitated, two people came up behind Youko-chan—presumably her friends.

"Is this the friend you wanted to invite along?" one of them asked.

"Wait, you know Amaori from the Quintet?"

Oh my god. They were boys! I flipped the freak out. To make matters worse, the boys were all from Class B. Stranger danger! They were good-looking, well put together, and athletic. Popular. Outgoing. Boys!!!

"So? How 'bout it, Renako-kun?" Youko-chan said.

"Um. Uh. Argh. Um. Well. I. Uh."

I thought I was starting to get a hang of this whole talking-to-boys thing, but I guess I was in for a rude awakening. The only representatives of masculinity I had any familiarity with were my classmates Shimizu-kun and Fujimura-kun. And even then, we just said hi sometimes.

Youko-chan came closer and smiled conspiratorially. "Guess what?" she whispered. "I think they're kinda into you. So, how 'bout it? Wanna be treated like a princess for a day?"

Oh my god, here they were: the people who targeted me, out of everyone in the Quintet! See, I told you! I told you the wiki listed me as the easiest route to pursue, every dating sim fan's fast-pass to instant social status success.

That just makes things worse, Youko-chan! I mentally screamed at

her. *They're going to try and…oh, I hate to even consider it…*talk *to me!*

Oh god, oh hell, oh god. I wanted to say no, but how? Youko-chan thought she was doing me a solid, and I didn't want this to spell the end of our budding acquaintanceship. Was there a way for me to turn her down without hurting anyone's feelings? Right. There was only one thing to do: develop the superpower to go back in time. *Go! Time, rewind! Latent time travel powers, activate!* I thought with all my might, bunching my eyebrows together with the effort. Alas, no latent powers materialized. Instead, help came from a completely different quarter.

"What on earth are you doing, Amaori?" asked—

"Satsuki-san!"

Satsuki-san frowned as she stepped out of the classroom and caught sight of me trying to awaken my psychokinetic powers. Then her eyes slid from me to Youko-chan.

"Terusawa," she almost growled.

Youko-chan giggled. "Hey there, Koto-san!"

Huh? I never realized they knew each other well enough to say hi like it wasn't, you know, a whole thing. "Are you guys pals?" I asked.

Satsuki-san's face bore no emotion whatsoever. Youko-chan, on the other hand, was all smiles. She said, "Yup, we've bumped into each other once or twice. Anyway, let's go hang out, Renako-kun."

Urgh. Could I not? But I really, really didn't want to turn her down outright.

Satsuki-san clapped a hand on my shoulder. "My sincerest apologies, but Amaori and I have other plans today."

"You do?" Youko-chan said. Her eyes narrowed, but it only lasted for a second before she reverted to her usual bright grin. "You sure about that?"

She looked over at me for confirmation, and I gave her a jerky nod. “Uh. Yes. Yes! We do. We’re going to…uh… Anyway, sorry I can’t make it!”

“Aww. Bummer. But oh well! See you some other time.”

Youko-chan looked over her shoulder at the guys. They seemed kinda bummed out too, but that didn’t stop them from waving and saying, “See ya.” Man, those were some really nice guys. I felt bad for what I’d just done to them. Ha ha… I waved back listlessly.

But as Youko-chan started to walk away, Satsuki-san said her name in truly chilling tones. Youko-chan stopped.

“I would appreciate it if you stopped taking the initiative without telling me. I thought I told you—I have this handled.”

Youko-chan looked back at us. She smiled in the same exact way she always did, but the edge of her mouth kept twitching. Like she was annoyed.

“Really now?” she said.

“Really now. Keep that in mind while you’re *on the job*.”

“Okie-dokie. Right back atcha, and good luck!” And with one more cheerful wave, Youko-chan was gone.

Uh…?

I looked up at Satsuki-san, mildly alarmed. There was some weird beef going on here, and it gave me the chills. Come to think of it, Satsuki-san had been super eager to beat Class B in the interclass competition. Maybe there were still some bad feelings left from that.

Gingerly, I asked, “Uh…do you guys not get along?”

“No, what makes you say that? I treat her no differently than I do anyone else.”

“You’re not wrong, but that’s not what I meant.”

Satsuki-san didn’t say anything. Instead, she glared at me for being so quick to agree with her. Excuse me? Who in their right mind wouldn’t agree with Satsuki-san? It wasn’t my fault she was catty to everybody!

“But thanks for the lifeline,” I added. “I was hoping to stick around and do a little more schoolwork before I went home. So this works out better for me.”

Satsuki-san, on the other hand, was all ready to go. Bag in hand and everything.

“Suit yourself,” she said. “But I am concerned for your little sister. I’ll be in the area as it is, so while I’m there, I’m thinking of dropping by your house.”

“Oh. Okay.”

So Satsuki-san and I left together.

On any other day, this would be the part where I would muse something like, *You know, it’s a relief to have a good pal like you.* Except it wasn’t. Not in the slightest. Satsuki-san made me nervous. Even if she was my very best friend in the whole wide world, she scared the pants off me. There were besties and, well…there’s Satsuki-san. She was kind of a category all to herself.

I needed to make things feel more casual. Somehow. Anyhow. There had to be a w—

Just then, Satsuki-san mentioned offhand, “Don’t take this the wrong way. I’m not trying to help you. I simply can’t focus on my

studies when your sister is on my mind. And I certainly didn't come running to your rescue when I heard Terusawa's voice."

"Wha—oh, okay. Whatever you say." Like a fish all too eager to be on the hook, I leapt to take the bait: a new topic of conversation. "Yeah, you'd never come help me out of the goodness of your heart, right? As if! Don't worry. Sure, I sometimes entertain the wild notion that you're, like, super kind at times. A literal angel. But I know that deep down you're just strict and nasty and awful to everyone. Especially yourself. You seem like the kind of person who would speak up in kindergarten story time and say, 'Momotaro should take the treasure all for himself and let those weak villagers get murdered by the ogres. Survival of the fittest. That's how the world works, to my mind. How else are we to interpret the cruel law of the jungle?'"

Satsuki-san kicked the back of my knee.

"Ow!" I yelped. "What was that for?"

She walked right on past me, her black hair fluttering behind her. "What are you stopping for? Keep moving, Amaori."

I trailed behind Satsukick-san in fear as she powerwalked to the train station, regaling her with the story of what went down when Ajisai-san came to my house.

"My, how fascinating," she said. But she didn't look very fascinated. She looked like her usual unfazed self. "It appears Sena's concern for other people's feelings has backfired on her."

"Huh. Now that you mention it, I guess it has."

"You'd be hard pressed to find a better person to turn to for general advice. However, I fear she struggles to make people open up when they don't want to talk to begin with. She may make a good priest, but she's no heart surgeon."

I didn't quite follow that last part, but she had me in the first half. Maybe she was right. Satsukick-san didn't seem to care about my sister, but something told me she really did want to help. I appreciated it, honest.

"Satsukick-san, you sure do have an eye for people," I told her.

She paused for one horribly awkward moment before asking, "In what sense?"

"Nothing bad! It's just, I thought Ajisai-san would be able to make everything all right. I never considered it might be a struggle for her until you said that."

I remembered what Satsukick-san told me last summer vacation: "Look beyond the version of her you made up in your head." In some sense, maybe I was still fixated on that imaginary image. And you know what? It really sucked when people pressured you to try things you couldn't do. Maybe it wasn't fair for me to put all this on Ajisai-san. *And then there was that bit,* I added to myself, *when she got huffy and slapped me. Did I cause that? Me?*

"How astute of you to notice," Satsukick-san said. "I see you've grown."

"You think?"

"Sure. Or at the very least, here's my opinion: I think it's best to know the undesirable or hidden portions of someone's personality. You can still be friends with them, and it even brings you closer together. That's how it is with family, you know. You forgive each other's faults."

Huh. That was some deep stuff. I thought I got what she was saying. Sorta. Or maybe one day I'd look back at this and go, *Ohhh, so* that's *what she was getting at!*

Like she said, this was a sign of growth. But I also felt like I wasn't growing fast enough. After all, my friends had this figured out already;

they were light years ahead of me. I mean, that last part's a no-brainer. Wasn't that why I promised Ajisai-san to try my best?

"Yeah! Try your best, me!" I told myself—and, well, Satsukick-san.

"By all means," she said. "Whatever makes you happy."

"Yeah, I'm gonna try my best! Someday, you're going to look at me with tears in your eyes and tell me, 'It's been an honor to know you.'"

"Mm-hmm. At your funeral."

She and I stepped onto the train and talked until we got to my stop.

"Incidentally," she said, "I have a question for you. If only because we've exhausted every other conversational topic. That's the only reason, of course."

"You're the boss," I said. "I guess? Anyway, shoot."

Satsukick-san followed up that absurdly long preamble by saying… (dun dun dun) "Has Terusawa done anything bad to you?"

"Wha?" I spluttered. "Boy, you guys really don't get along."

I was no stranger to my friends having disagreements with each other, but I wish I was. A stranger, I mean. I sucked at tiptoeing around other people's feelings, which was one of the major reasons life was such torture.

"Not at all," Satsukick-san said. "It's a serious question."

"Uh, you sure you don't have it out for her…?"

"If you're referring to the incident with Class B, I worked through all my feelings during the competition. The only one I'm still upset at is Mai. That victory would have been mine had she not snatched it away."

"Come on, you can't blame her for that."

Eh, well. I guess this made sense. Satsukick-san wasn't the type to waste mental real estate on an enemy she'd already trounced. It was like a waste of brain hard drive space. So whatever animosity I sensed aimed at Youko-chan must have been a figment of my imagination. Yet if that was true, why was she asking me about Youko-chan? I tried puzzling it out, but no matter how I looked at it, it just didn't add up.

"Never mind," Satsukick-san said. And with those two little words, she ended the conversation, leaving me high and dry without an explanation! The tyranny of this girl.

"Well, to answer your original question," I said, "not anything *bad*. We chat when we bump into each other. Or she invites me to hang out with her once in a blue moon."

"Oh?" said Satsuki-san. "And where have these hangouts occurred, pray tell?"

"Uh, you know that café between school and the train station? We went there to chill after school one time. And talk and stuff."

"About what?"

"Huh? I dunno. What *did* we talk about?"

I searched my memories. I felt like it was mostly her asking me questions about a whole lotta nothin'.

"Oh wait," I said.

"Hm?"

"Oh. Uh, nothing. Never mind."

Actually, now that I thought about it, Youko-chan *had* grilled me about her huge misunderstanding—that was, that Kaho-chan and I were dating. When she said, "Gosh, Renako-kun, you sure are popular with the ladies. What, do you have another girlfriend or something? Haha jk (unless?)," my heart about leaped out of my throat. Because uh. She

wasn't wrong about the multiple girlfriends thing. Just, I was dating Mai and Ajisai-san, not Kaho-chan! But wild horses couldn't have dragged that out of me.

In the end, Youko-chan grinned and said, "Course, it can't be easy to just, like, come out and say it. Not to me. Guess I just gotta keep working at it till we're closer!"

On the one hand, I was glad she wanted to be my friend. Believe me, I was totally down to be buds. But on that other, that'd just make it easier for her to be nosy, you feel me? I guess girls just liked talking about crushes and dating and stuff. Even Satsukick-san had her romance book binges.

"Just FYI," Satsukick-san said, "I wasn't trying to make this a big thing. I promise."

"Okay. So, we're at the stage where we're feeling things out? Trying to put a label on it?"

"Huh? Who's we?"

"You and me. In this conversation. We're trying to put a label on my relationship with Youko-chan. Right?"

"Oh my god." Satsukick-san sighed in exasperation.

Why was she bringing up Youko-chan out of nowhere anyway? Wait a sec. Galaxy brain moment. Remember that thing I learned from Prof. Ajisai?

"Are you jealous?" I asked. "Are you concerned she's going to steal away your very best friend in the whole wide world? Ah ha! This is textbook jealousy. Look at me, I'm learning things."

Satsukick-san kicked the back of my knee again. Jeez, she was on a violent streak lately! Yandere much?

I didn't know how to handle Satsudoublekick-san's jealousy. It was as unwieldy to work with as nitroglycerin, and honestly? I didn't think I was cut out to handle it.

At any rate, we got home, and I knocked on my sister's door. Unlike last time, I opened it to find her messing around on her phone in bed instead of gaming.

"Hey there," I said. "You have another visitor."

"Huh?" My sister catapulted herself out of bed.

The black-haired beauty behind me, Satsudoubl—okay, this joke was getting old. Satsuki-san gave my sister a little wave. "Thank you for having me," she said. "It's nice to see you again."

"S-Satsuki-senpai!" my sister stuttered. She whisked a brush through her hair with one hand while yanking out a cushion for Satsuki-san to sit on with the other. Then she turned on me and glared. "Oneechan, you need to warn me next time you bring someone over."

"Sorry," I said out loud. (Internally, I stuck my tongue out at her.) Warning her ahead of time would have let her prepare a defense. You could bet your butt I'd keep bringing people over with zero notice.

"Gosh, I'm sorry I'm still in my PJs," my sister said. "Um…Satsuki-senpai, are you here to see me for something? Just like Ajisai-senpai?"

Satsuki-san folded her legs and sat down primly. "Indeed I am. Your sister told me about your situation, so I thought you and I might have a chat."

"Mmm… You really didn't need to go to all the trouble." My sister bowed. For all her (many) other faults, she had always had perfect manners around her senpais.

But this wasn't like last time. Because Satsuki-san was up to bat, and she lived in a whole different universe from Ajisai-san. Ajisai-san

cared about the other person's feelings. She'd back down if you didn't open up. But Satsuki-san? Satsuki-san was a woman raised under the tutelage of a mace-n'-stun-gun-toting mother. She knew her mom's lessons by heart: if anyone stood in your way, you gotta get 'em good. She could have been one of the Zoldycks. Even as stubborn as my baby sis was, she couldn't take on Satsuki-san. My little sister was about to learn the true meaning of violence.

I could tell Satsuki-san was totally shadowboxing inside her head. But on the outside, she just tucked her hair behind her ear before pulling the trigger. The trigger being: "I hear Sena visited you the other day."

"Mm-hmm. You mean Ajisai-senpai, right? We played games together and had a good time."

"Sena and I are cut from very different cloth. You'll find I have no desire to spare your feelings," Satsuki-san said in an even tone.

The tension in the room grew so thick you could cut it with a knife. Uh, overkill much? When this exchange (and we're *not* talking bullets, Satsuki-san) was over, was my sister going to be left sobbing like a baby? As hard as it was to believe, I couldn't rule out the possibility! Maybe my sister would be so traumatized by this raven-haired vision of beauty that she'd whimper, "I don't ever want to go back to school! People are scaaary!" And then she'd become a *real* school-skipping delinquent. Hey, it was possible! Not like my sister was ever a crier, but whatever. Wait. She never cried, right? Hmm. Some old memory at the back of my brain started needling me…

But before I could recall what it was, my sister said, "Um…what exactly does that mean?"

"You've been skipping recently, is that correct?"

"Yes."

“Then I would imagine you’re falling behind on your studies.”

Satsuki-san got straight to the point. Haruna’s grades were, like, an objective worry. But if her family or friends brought it up, she could be like, “You think I don’t know?!” Because it was blatantly obvious, right? Yet that didn’t stop Satsuki-san.

“I know this is nigh-on oxymoronic,” she went on, “but missing a day of school takes a day to make up. Miss a week, and that’s all the longer to get back on track. What’s your plan to make up for lost time?”

It was almost too pointed of a question. It did a number on me, that was for sure. If Satsuki-san had said this to me when I was in my hooky phase, I would have broken down and bawled.

But my sister did not. “I know,” she said, completely to the point. “And I don’t care.” She stood up, went over to her desk, and picked up her notebook. “I’m still following along in the curriculum whenever I can.”

“Wait, what?” I said. Seriously? “You’re still studying, even when you’re not going to school?”

“Uh, yeah? Hello?” Her tone was all like, *Who are you? Captain Obvious?*

Wait, but like. Deadass?

Meanwhile, Satsuki-san didn’t react at all. “Self-studying at home is not like learning in a classroom. I doubt you could understand the material half as well.”

I expected my sister to go, “Nuh-uh!” But she didn’t. “Yeah, you have a point,” she said. “But I’m a pretty good student, if I do say so myself. I’m hovering around the top thirty mark in the class ranking, so it’s not the end of the world if I slip a little.”

“Oh?” Satsuki-san raised an eyebrow. Oh snap, I was about to see

some real shit go down. “I wonder how accurate this assessment is. I fear you may be too optimistic.”

“I guess that’s possible. Oh, wait!” My sister’s face lit up. “Could I message you on LINE if I run into a problem that stumps me? That’d make learning way easier.”

Hold the phone. That would destroy my sister’s need to ever go back to school!

“Sure,” said Satsuki-san.

My mouth bypassed my brain and yelped, “What do you mean, ‘sure’?!”

Satsuki-san didn’t so much as deign to turn and look at me. “Why should I refuse to help anyone with the desire to learn? No matter what their situation may be.”

“Thank you so much, Satsuki-senpai!” my sister exclaimed. Before, she had bowed as like. A joke, sorta. But now she bowed way deeper.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Why were they acting like this was problem solved?

“Satsuki-san, don’t just give up because your first attempt failed,” I said.

Satsuki-san frowned at me. “What do you want me to say to her? ‘School is a place to get life experience. You should go. Building communication skills is vital.’ Hmm?”

She didn’t want to be a hypocrite. And, like, I got that. But still.

“You said it yourself, didn’t you? The best way to win an argument—be it internet drama or whatever—is to emotionally check out! Be a gray rock!”

“Look, I didn’t come to your house to argue with your sister.”

“Geh!” Of course. She was right, and I was the one losing track of

the bigger picture.

"Anyway," Satsuki-san said, turning back around to face my sister and deliver one final repartee, "your learning environment is a living thing. The longer you stay home from school, the deeper you bury yourself in a hole. Soon, that hole starts to feel like the one place you belong. Eventually, you'll stop feeling like you fit in anywhere at all. Don't forget that."

My sister fell silent. Her eyes flicked away from Satsuki-san's glare for the shortest of intervals. It hit home, or at least a little bit.

Yet my sister put her usual expression back on a heartbeat later. "Okay. Thanks, Satsuki-senpai." She nodded, like she was ready. Like she'd be fine with not fitting in.

The last dregs of Satsuki-san's fight went out of her. "All right," she said. "Very well, then. Let's move on. Tell me what difficulty you're having in your schoolwork."

My sister lit up. "Thanks! I have some questions in math, science, and English."

"Tsk, tsk. That's quite the list." Satsuki-san made the facial expression equivalent of shaking her head in disgust as my little sister grabbed her textbooks. Then she sat down beside my sister, who immediately became private tutor Satsuki-san's model pupil. I trembled on the sidelines like a third wheel. First Ajisai-san, now Satsuki-san. My friends were dropping like flies before my sister's powers of obstinacy. It defied all my expectations.

"By the way," Satsuki-san said, "can I make a comment? Although it's none of my business."

"Yeah, what's up?" my sister said.

Satsuki-san remarked, seemingly offhand, "You really shouldn't give your family so much reason to worry."

My sister was taken aback for a sec before she turned to look at me. Her big sis. Our eyes met for an instant, and I almost thought she was about to say something, when—

—she completely laughed it off. “Don’t worry, it’s fine! Oneechan can’t worry about me; *she’s* one to talk.”

“Very true,” said Satsuki-san.

“Hey!” I snapped. *You’re right,* I thought, *but you shouldn’t say it!*

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“Get this,” I told Kaho-chan the next day. “She’s actually studying at home even while not going to school. And like, staying on top of it and everything.”

“Wow,” said Kaho-chan. “That’s kinda legit.”

We were enjoying the last of the good autumn weather by eating lunch on the benches in the courtyard. Unlike my gloomy expression, it was a bright and beautiful autumn day. Not a cloud in the sky, nice and warm. The kind of weather you just ate up.

“But does it really count as playin’ hooky if you’re still hitting the books?” Kaho-chan said.

“See, that’s what makes me wonder.”

I repeated what Satsuki-san told me as she left: “Your sister said she can afford to have her grades slip, didn’t she? That suggests she intends to go back to school at some point. You might consider this closer to a school strike, perhaps.”

“Hmm.” Kaho-chan folded her arms. “It kinda makes sense. But there’s still gotta be some sort of reason for this, y’know?”

“Yeah, right? Not like she’ll ever tell me what it is.”

If Ajisai-san and Satsuki-san couldn't get the answer out of her, what chance did I stand? Bluh.

"I'll hit up Serarara Serara tomorrow and ask," Kaho-chan said.

Of all my Quintet helpers, Kaho-chan was the only one whose assistance took an indirect route. "You gotta go through her buddies," past Kaho-chan said. "I'm moots with one of them! Maybe that'll be some help."

Like she said, Kaho-chan went way back with my sister's friend Seira-san. Let's not beat around the bush—they were cosplay buddies. Seira-san probably knew why my sister had stopped going to school. And so Kaho-chan decided to ask her. I would never have come up with that idea, not in a million years.

Kaho-chan slurped from the straw of her juice box. "But she keeps leaving me on read. I spammed her DMs on LINE and Insta, but no dice. She's told me nothin'."

"What'd you expect? It's the same person behind both accounts," I said. Actually, wait a sec. "Do you think that means Seira-san knows what's up?"

"Yeah, totes. She's gotta." Kaho-chan nodded as assertively as a detective who'd already discovered the conclusive evidence. "Leave it to me. I'll help your sis 'cause you're my one and only Rena-chin!"

She smiled with such confidence that my treacherous heart sang. "Kaho-chan!" I exclaimed. "I'm the luckiest person alive to have such a good friend in you!"

"Darn tootin'. And don't you forget it…again."

"I said I was sorry! Give it a rest, will you? I promise I'll remember you this time."

"Mm-hmm. You keep telling yourself that." She gave me a "Sure,

Jan" look. It's hard being a reformed criminal, I tell you. Society never looked at you the same way.

"What can I do to make you believe me?" I asked.

"Hmm… Ah ha." The expression on Kaho-chan's face was anything but good. "You can get my name and a li'l heart tattooed under your belly button!"

I grabbed my lower belly. "Something less permanent, please!"

Imagine if Mai or Ajisai-san saw. How the heck could I ever explain it?

"Aww, but then I'd finally know how much my Wifey loves me," Kaho-chan teased.

"You rotten liar. You'd be creeped out to hell and back, I know it! And I'm not going to get a tattoo anyway!"

I paused to wheeze for breath. Kaho-chan was majorly messing with me again.

Speaking of messing with me, remember the Kaho-chan in Ajisai-san's lap incident? Ajisai-san already apologized, so that part was chill. But I wondered if this counted as flirting too. Would it make Ajisai-san jealous if she knew?

I glanced at Kaho-chan. She caught my eye and went "Hmm? Wassup?"

Nah. This was just friends shooting the breeze, right? Normal friendly banter. So it was fine. Right? I put the mic up to the Ajisai-san who lived in my head. *What do* you *think, Ajisai-san?* And she said, "Yeah, don't worry about it! It's totally okay." Sweet, thanks!

"Yeah?" Kaho-chan prompted again.

"Never mind; it's all good. What would I do without you, Kaho-chan?"

“Are you tryna come on to me again?”

“Oh, for the love of—no!”

Making a pass at Kaho-chan went beyond jealousy. That was just cheating! And cheating was for bad people!

“Y’know what, Rena-chin?” Kaho-chan said. She folded her arms and propped her chin up on them. What now? “You’re dating Mai-Mai and Aa-chan at the same time, aren’tcha?” she went on.

“Y-yeah.”

I took a quick, fearful glance around to make sure no one was close enough to overhear us. Fortunately, Kaho-chan wasn’t an idiot like me, so no one was in earshot.

“How’s it going for you guys? You happy?” she asked.

I tried to say “Yeah, totally!” but a whole host of things—the heavy weight of responsibility, the awareness of eyes on me, my spinelessness, my failure to give my relationship my hundred percent—all raised their hands and belted out, “I object!”

So I hesitated and finally said, “Uh, I mean. Kinda.”

“Don’tcha think you might be happier if you guys became, like, a quadrouple?” Kaho-chan said. “Or maybe even a quintouple?”

I fell silent for a moment before my brain kicked in. “What kind of question is that?”

“I’m just askin’. Idle curiosity and all.”

Idle curiosity. *Idle curiosity?* To be fair, if three of my friends had started dating one another, I guess I would have been curious too.

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe,” I said.

First off: I wasn’t planning on dating more people. Got it? Got it. But with that out of the way, Satsuki-san once said there wasn’t much difference between dating two versus three girls. Which kinda sounded

like she was asking to join. But I think she meant it seriously and not, like, in a flirtatious way.

"Like if you dated Saa-chan, for instance," Kaho-chan said.

My heart skipped a beat at the sudden name drop. "Huh?" I said. Huh indeed. Had Kaho-chan read my mind? Oh god, don't tell me there were *more* psychics out there.

"Okay, maybe not her," Kaho-chan relented. "You'd piss her off too much."

"Excuse me?!"

For a matter of idle curiosity, Kaho-chan was putting a lot of serious thought into this.

Was Satsuki-san up to no good again? And I was just blissfully unaware? Nah. For all that Satsuki-san was…well, Satsuki-san…she wasn't the type to cause problems on purpose. She was levelheaded and rational…I thought…? Not super confident on that one.

"'Kay, so picture this. One day, this super attractive, awesome, bee-yootiful girl shows up," Kaho-chan began.

"Right, I'm following."

"And this girl gets you to, like, fall head over heels for her. She's so great that you're on cloud nine around her. And you start being like, 'Dang, I wanna go out with her.'"

An image of Mai immediately came to mind. What if there was, heaven forbid, a second Mai? Heck no. I would not make it out of that alive. Okay, so not Mai Part Two. The image in my head became a faceless shadow. Who the heck was that supposed to be? I dunno, but whatever.

"So? If that happened, what would you do?" Kaho-chan asked.

"Hmm. To be honest, I can't imagine anyone being more attractive

than Mai and Ajisai-san both."

"Ew. Loveposting on main. Fine, she doesn't have to be more attractive. She can be on the same level!"

"If she's just as attractive as they are, then there's no way she'd ever fall in love with me."

"Oh my gaaahd. You are so friggin' obnoxious."

Maybe so, but Mai and Ajisai-san catching feelings for me was a miracle to begin with. It was like playing rock-paper-scissors against everyone in the world and somehow beating them all.

"Fine!" Kaho-chan snapped. "What if that happened to Aa-chan?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like if she met someone hecka cute and said she wanted to date 'em too. What would you do?"

I fell silent. In my head, Ajisai-san sidled up with Tom Cruise in tow. Would that mean I would start dating Tom too? Would we end up on a Tom-kun, Renako (and you know he wouldn't pronounce it right) basis? I mean. If that's what Ajisai-san wanted, then who was I to say no? Ajisai-san went along with my weird dating scheme, so I had no choice but to accept Tom. On the flip side, if I just couldn't reconcile myself with that, then did that mean Ajisai-san and I would break up?

"That's a really hard question, Kaho-chan," I said.

"Is that a no to the quadrouple? Darn." She wiped her brow with all the exhaustion of a scientist who'd failed once more on their quest to bring a person back from the dead.

Still. She had a point. "I guess there's nothing stopping either Mai or Ajisai-san from crushing on someone else too."

I was trying my best for them, but plenty of other people were also trying their best in their own ways. I couldn't be so full of myself as to

think that I was the only person to ever be Mai or Ajisai-san's special someone. I mean, they were dating each other too, weren't they?

"Maybe Ajisai-san made a pact in childhood to marry a boy," I said. "Then he went to the U.S., grew up, became Tom Cruise, and came back. Now when he shows up at Ashigaya High, it might rekindle Ajisai-san's feelings for him. You never know; it could happen."

"Who? The guy with the jacked-up plastic surgery?" Kaho-chan muttered to herself.

Once I said it out loud, I felt a dark stab of pain race through my heart. My inner voice whimpered, *But Ajisai-san's dating* me… And that's when the realization hit. Light bulb moment × 1,000. Was I jealous? Oh god, this really did feel awful. How dare Ajisai-san have feelings for some random boy! Huh. Dang. So this was jealousy. Real, legit jealousy. FEELINGS OF JEALOUSY added to inventory!

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked Kaho-chan. "What if I can't accept him? But I need to for Ajisai-san's happiness. Yet I just can't! There's no freaking way I can date Tom Cruise!"

"How 'bout you let Ajisai-san leave the throuple so she can date Tom Cruise?"

"That's just as bad. Wait. But what if she'd be happier that way?"

And I'd still be left with Mai, which was already more than I deserved. But that wasn't the point. Man. Three-way dating meant double the girlfriends, but it also meant double the anxiety.

This conversation had long since spiraled out of control. It was stupid to get worked up about a hypothetical scenario, but then again, I was as dumb as a stump. So.

I asked Ajisai-san a few days later if she had a childhood friend who'd left Japan for the U.S., to which she said nah. Thank god. Wait, that wasn't the point. The image of Ajisai-san smiling as Kaho-chan sat

on her lap flashed through my mind.

The words came out before I could stop them. “If you, uh, have a crush on Kaho-chan and want to date her too, I guess I could live with it. Even if that means there’s four of us. I think it could work out if she was our fourth person.”

Ajisai-san went completely silent. Hm? What, was it something I said?

I looked up to ask what was wrong, and at that exact moment, Kaho-chan flicked me on the forehead. Ow!

“What was that for?” I protested.

Kaho-chan smiled at me, but there was zero warmth in that look. “Um, Rena-chin? KYS?”

“Excuse me?! You were the one who brought it up!” The cheek! Why were people treating me like a punching bag all of a sudden?

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“Thank you for waiting for me, Renako… Renako, are you quite all right?”

I staggered into the limo and threw my arms around the seated Mai within. I groaned. “Mai, please be the one person who sticks with me until the end.”

“Y-yes, I suppose? What happened?”

My conversation with Kaho-chan at lunch ate at me for the rest of the day. I could barely focus in class all afternoon—although that was nothing new.

Today we were busting out the big guns in our war on Haruna. Big guns = Mai. But before we got to the showdown, I needed to get my

head on straight.

I groaned again. “Maaaiii. Oh, is it really you? You feel just like her…smell just like her too.”

“Y-yes, well. That would be because I’m me.” She patted my back as I draped myself across her lap.

“What about you, Mai?” I said. “Do you have an old friend from childhood?”

“I do, but I don’t see why you’re asking.”

“Don’t tell me. Are they a Hollywood actor?”

“No. To the best of my knowledge, Satsuki has never been in any films.” As I was still sprawled across her legs, she asked me, “Is your imagination acting up and causing you to get anxious again?”

“You know me so well,” I said. “You could be a professor in Amaori Renakology when you grow up.”

“That would be lovely.”

Mai was a sweetheart. She just rolled with my incomprehensible nonsense. God, I didn’t want to lose her. That’s why I kept working so hard. Yet for a self-appointed goal, I was awfully quick to lose heart whenever a new opportunity for worry presented itself.

I could feel my inner jerkwad junior-high self cackling at me. “You shouldn’t have tried earning this happiness to begin with! You don’t deserve it!” *Oh, goddamn it.* I couldn’t let myself be beaten by someone who did nothing but look down on other people. Even if that person was, well, also myself.

I lurched upright and off of Mai’s lap.

“No!” I said. “Forget any of this ever happened. Redo! Oh, Mai, it’s so good to see you. Thank you for coming home with me today.”

I shot her an easygoing, happy smile. Then Mai took my hand and

planted a kiss on the tip of my nose. Gwagh! It was the lightest of touches, just a brush of her lips against my face, but I stiffened. My cheeks lit up fire engine red.

Mai beamed at me. “There,” she said. “Feeling better now?”

I nodded woodenly. “Yeah.”

“Are you sure? We could go a bit further, if you’d like.”

“Nuh-uh no way no Touchy Time or Touched Time before we see my sister because that is literally the most awkward thing on the planet and oh my god I would die!” I slammed back at roughly fifty million kilometers per hour.

Mai chuckled. My heart galloped like a racehorse. Just because. Well. You know. Because she caught me off guard!

Shocking, wasn’t it, how a single bit of PDA could wash all that evil anxiety away. Brains, man. I dunno how the heck they worked.

Speaking of brains, the Amaori Renako who lived inside my brain turned her withering gaze on me. “You worked yourself up into a tizzy, and then you’re all back to normal the minute your gurrrlfriend kisses you? Yuck. Get a load of this schoolgirl with a crush, everybody.”

Yeah, and what of it? Maybe I was a schoolgirl with a crush. So what? Mai and I were dating. So what?! Yes, classifying myself as a “schoolgirl with a crush” made my hair stand on end. But what of it? Huh? Huh?!

(Hold on. Give me a sec to catch my breath.)

Well, from the sheer shock of the kiss, at least I was no longer worried about the jealousy issue.

“Mai,” I said. “Your first impression of me must be totally shattered.” Cat was out of the bag now. Amaori Renako was a W-E-I-R-D-O.

“Oh? I-I suppose, yes.” She looked slightly startled. “Well, but of course I thought you were charming from the moment we met. But I have noticed a growing maturity every time you surmount a fresh obstacle. Not to mention…” Almost like she was professing her feelings to me, Mai whispered, “Not to mention, you’re more adorable than ever.”

I made a strange choking noise before I finally coughed out, “Thanks!” I smiled like I was dead inside. God, this was mortifying.

Mai’s eyes widened in momentary surprise, and then she laughed.

“Wh-what’s so funny?” I said.

“Oh, nothing. I was only thinking that I always tell you the truth. But this is the first time you’ve ever accepted a compliment.”

There went the choking noise again. This time, my head also went ka-boom.

“You’ve come a long way,” Mai said. She folded her arms. “Oh, that you have.”

I protested, my voice rising to tones so shrill they flirted with the upper range of the human hearing spectrum, “Th-th-th-that’s not true! I was just! Going along with the bit! Yes, and-ing you! Because you were clearly making a joke! I’m not adorable in the slightest!”

“My next goal will be for you to respond to my compliments with, ‘Aww, thanks. You make me smile!’”

“So not happening. Not in a million years.”

“You’re adorable, Renako.”

“I most certainly am not! I have never been adorable, not once in my whole life!” I snarled at her.

Mai just shrugged back, clearly amused with herself. This freaking girl, I’m telling you. Gaaaaaaaaaaahd. This *freaking* girl!

I placed a hand on my chest above my haywire heart. This time, I wasn't freaked out about jealousy and its related issues. I was much, much more concerned about turning into the complete antithesis of myself. I mean, I'd only known Mai for what, less than a year? By the time the year was out, maybe I really would be all, "Aww, you make me smile!" If that happened, I'd…well, I'd…

Scratch that. Point was, I had no idea how much Mai really meant that. Either way, she'd gotten rid of my fears…by giving me a whole host of bigger things to worry about.

The source of said worries beamed. "To return to the topic at hand, I do understand your concern. It's only natural to be worried when one's sister turns truant."

"Yeah. You're telling me."

Mind you, that was only number three on my list of concerns. (Terrible older sister, that's me.) You know what? It was time to shape up and focus on my baby sis. Shifting into serious mode. Amaorinvolved and Amaorinterested Renako time.

"That aside," I said, "thanks for coming with me today. Seriously. I appreciate you taking the time off work to help me."

"Oh heavens, what are you saying? Haruna is my future sister-in-law, so why wouldn't I drop everything and help? Also, did you tell her we were coming?"

"Yeah, a few minutes ago."

To be honest, I had wanted to spring a surprise attack on my sis, but Mai insisted I text that we were on our way. I guess Mai was that confident in her own abilities. That, or she had some other plan. The situation was so dire that all my hopes rode on her, and I felt kinda guilty about that. Whatever issue my sister had going on looked pretty darn thorny, you know?

“Ajisai-san and Satsuki-san didn’t have any luck,” I reminded her. “You don’t need to bend over backward to pull this off either.”

“I know,” said Mai. “Don’t worry.”

I took her hand in mine and squeezed it. “It’ll be okay. I know all your bad sides, all the things that you want to keep hidden. And I still want to be with you, remember? I see you for who you are—the real Mai. Not just the fantasy Mai.”

“Y-yes, I know. But I was not aware you’d lost so much faith in me…?”

She looked pained. But I didn’t mean it like that!

“No! It’s just, agh! It’s a thing Satsuki-san said the other day!”

I could only imagine the stink eye Hanatori-san was giving us as we freaked out in the backseat. When I felt her eyes on me, I sobered up. I doubted she was thinking much of anything… But you know.

Then I spilled all the beans to Mai. I felt like I was doing Satsuki-san dirty, exposing her like this, which made me too afraid to look at my phone for a while afterward. (By the way, Satsuki-san never ended up texting me. I guess her sharp ears weren’t omnipotent after all.)

Once I was done, Mai smiled gently. “Hmm, I see. But I don’t understand why that is an issue. After all, I have shown you quite a few humiliating aspects of myself from day one.”

Wait, she had? “You sure? You’ve always looked really cool to me.”

I scrutinized her so heavily she turned away. “…As thrilled as I am to hear you say that, you make me very bashful.” She covered her reddening cheeks. Aww. That was cute. Mai was way cuter than me, that’s for sure!

Also, I dunno if I agreed with her. It's true that Mai had slipped up in front of me a lot. But the way she acted in the interclass competition was so cool it superseded all of that. Besides, Mai may have been a glamorous model and the supadari of Ashigaya High, but she was at her core just one teenage girl. Yeah. Just a girl who lit up when I complimented her.

From moment one of high school, I had idolized Mai with all my heart. Then as time went on, I learned a lot more about her. But I don't think that made me like her any less. If anything, my feelings for her only grew. Maybe this was another example of me being a weirdo.

We both fell silent—Mai, bashful and me, suddenly nervous. Oh god, I needed something to talk about. Stat! Anything would work, so I thrust my hand into the invisible box in my head marked "Conversation topics." By a stroke of luck, my hand brushed a ball inside. I grabbed it, yanked it out, and thrust it in Mai's face.

"Oh hey, so I had this conversation with Satsuki-san earlier," I began.

Because written on the ball was "What's the whole purpose of going to school, anyway?" Not a bad choice, me. Or so I thought.

But then Mai said, "Goodness, you and Satsuki are awfully close."

"Huh?!" So much for getting the conversational ball rolling. Here came the price of invoking Satsuki-san's name twice in such quick succession.

Look, Mai had the wrong idea. Satsuki-san could leave a strong impact on anybody. Which meant she left me with a lot of things to think about. No more, no less.

Now flustered, I asked, "S-sorry, are you jealous?"

That delightfully funny phrase of Mai's ("I'm absolutely not jealous. Duh.") hovered in the back of my mind. (Looking back on it, it

struck me as cute more than anything.)

Mai looked like she was about to say something, but then she fell silent. She turned to face the window and muttered, “Maybe so.”

Urgh. Her shyness was really, really cute. There went my heart rate again. It was no fair! Mai was always Uber McCool Girl around everyone else, but she acted hella cute around me and only me. I dared anyone to see this and *not* fall for her.

Okay, heartbeat, now’s not the time for you to do your thang, I told it. I had to reassure Mai. After all, she was only upset because I was being a bad partner.

“I-it’s okay, Mai,” I said. “I, uh. Um. I really l-l-like you. Don’t worry!”

My delivery was about as good as a wonkily folded paper airplane, but hey. I said it!

Mai smiled back, as airily as a gentle breeze. “I know. Thank you, Renako, and I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Oh?”

I mean, this was *my* lack of virtue to blame—that I gave Mai so much room to doubt my fidelity, that is. Which I almost said out loud, but then I realized I would probably get all defensive and aggressive about it. So I shut up. I’d just have to keep trying to do better.

And instead, I said, “H-hey, uh…what sort of things do I do that make you jealous?”

If we could establish a precedent of what the accused (Ms. Amaori R.) did to make the plaintiff (Ms. Oduka M.) jealous, we could take steps to prevent this incident from ever happening again. Or so was my rationale. Basically, I wanted to learn more about envy. I’d only taken

my first baby steps into learning about jealousy. Now it was time to take on Mai's.

Mai looked torn. She tilted her head, her blonde hair swishing around her. "I'm not sure how much of the truth I should share."

"Please, go into as much detail as possible."

"Mm…" I could tell she was on the fence about speaking up, but she finally gave in to my pestering. "Well, I suppose. Truth be told, just about everything you do makes me jealous."

"Just about, huh?"

Fascinating. Apparently, the only way to make her *not* jealous was locking me away from the outside world inside her apartment. Which was not exactly the easiest thing to do.

Mai cleared her throat and went on. "Mind you, jealousy isn't measured in a binary—that is, whether one is jealous or not. Jealousy is a gradation, or at least that's how it seems to me."

It sounded like an excuse, but I said, "Sure, I get it."

Like it wasn't just ones and zeroes. It was scattered all the way from one to a hundred. Kinda like romantic feelings.

"It's a rather complex emotion," Mai said. "Particularly when Satsuki is involved. You know how she hates losing to me."

"S-sorry," I said and immediately bowed. I picked up on the unspoken "So I feel especially jealous when you kiss her." Come on, Mai, we were just friends. It wasn't what it looked like. (Unless?)

"On the flip side, I'm actually less jealous now about your interactions with Ajisai. For a time, I considered her my biggest threat. That is, before she asked you out."

"Wait, seriously?"

"Ajisai-san" and "threat" didn't belong in the same sentence.

“Well, she’s quite attractive. Naturally, I never let my feelings sour my friendship with her.”

“Huh. Okay.”

When Ajisai-san confided in me that Mai had given her a push to ask me out, I thought, “Oh my god, Mai’s hecka nice”…and immediately remembered how Ajisai-san once said Mai was too straightforward and awkward for her own good. Which didn’t sound like her, not at first blush. Mai could do anything with grace. But you know what? Maybe that was true after all.

There was something special about Mai, something I didn’t comprehend. And that was the reason why I wouldn’t change her for the world. Not even if it cost me. That “something” was what motivated her to flee to France after Ajisai-san and I got together. And, man, you know what? After enough time had passed, I found that really endearing.

That’s why I reached out and gave Mai’s hand a squeeze. She grunted, but she let me hold her hand. *You know what, Mai?* I thought at her. *You’re really darn cute.*

“Wait, and Kaho-chan?” I asked.

Mai tilted her head in confusion. “What about Kaho-chan?”

“Oh, I’m still talking about the jealousy thing. Have you ever gotten jealous of me and Kaho-chan?”

“Of you and her…?” Mai looked beyond baffled. Was Kaho-chan not even on her radar?

“Uh, yeah?” I said. “The person who literally asked you out?”

“She did…?”

“What, did you forget?!”

“Ahh, all right. It’s ringing a bell. Well, she’s very cute. A delightfully charming young woman, you might say. Seeing you and her

together warms my heart. In France, we call such lovely sprites *la fée*. She's like the fairy who turned the pumpkin into Cinderella's coach." Mai chuckled.

"Do you legit think Kaho-chan's a fairy?!" I asked.

It was a shocking reveal. Ajisai-san adored Kaho-chan unconditionally; Mai saw her as a fairy. But it made sense—fairies were tricksters, after all. Mai kinda had a point.

Just then, we entered my neighborhood. "We shall arrive momentarily," Hanatori-san said, cutting our conversation short. Wow. She'd memorized the whole way to my house. I almost felt bad.

I sent my sister another message as Hanatori-san parked the car and let me out. I pushed open the front door and marched to my sister's room. "Hey!" I yelled. "Let's get a move on!"

I found my sister sitting in her desk chair. She swiveled to look at me, and since I didn't have anyone else with me, she made no secret of her displeasure. "What's this all about?" she said. "Why'd you text me out of nowhere and tell me we're going out?"

"You complain, but you still got dressed," I pointed out. She even looked pretty good. My sister was tall for a junior high schooler and acted mature for her age. Most of the time, she seemed more like an older sister than me, much to my annoyance.

"Duh. You said Mai-senpai was coming over."

"Yup. Now, c'mon. Let's go."

I made a U-turn and went back outside.

Mai turned on the charm and the beaming smile. "Why hello, Haruna-kun. It has been far too long."

"M-Mai-senpai! It's great to see you." My sister bowed. Her smile

was as bright as the screen on her phone turned up to max. I knew this was beating a dead horse, but the way she acted with anyone older than her—sans me, of course—was waaay different than her usual attitude. If she had been anyone else's little sister but mine, maybe I could've learned to like her. Nah, who am I kidding? She was too damn peppy. I would never have gone near her.

"My apologies for the sudden invite," Mai said. "I hope you had enough time to get ready."

"Yes! I'm always ready for you. You can call me up twenty-four-seven!"

My sister fell in step behind Mai. I had already told my mom we were going to get dinner with a friend, so all three of us left without further ado and marched right back to the limo.

"Whoa!" my sister exclaimed. "Is that car yours?"

Heh heh heh. Her amazement stroked my ego. *Why so startled, Sis? It's just your everyday limo. What, are those so rare?* I mean, I wasn't saying that out loud because it wasn't, like, my limo. But you got the idea.

Hanatori-san stepped out of the driver seat and opened the door for my sister. "Here you are, miss," she said.

My sister squealed. *Why so squealy, Sis? She's only the hired help. Oh, and did I ever mention that she once personally bathed me?* Okay, I really wasn't saying that out loud. Hanatori-san would have given me a death glare.

My sister turned as stiff as a board and squeaked, "O-okay!" She clambered into the car and took the middle seat while Mai and I sat on either side of her. The car was so big, though, that it wasn't cramped at all.

"Oh my god," Haruna said. "Oh. My. God. These cushions are

lighter than air. Holy cannoli."

She poked the seat. Heh heh heh. Heh heh heh heh.

The car rumbled to life. My sister was on cloud nine for a couple of seconds before she (ignored me and) turned to Mai. She asked, "Uh, where exactly are we going?"

Mai gave her a warm, protective smile. Then she chuckled and raised her pointer finger in an explanatory pose. "Somewhere delightful."

She looked like a walking, talking anime trope. My sister and I whispered in tandem, "Oh my god, she's so cool."

Wait a minute. We made eye contact and then immediately looked away in embarrassment. Urgh. How dare Mai be so darn cool just by, like, sitting there? If she kept that up, even my sister would fall in love with her. Imagine if my sister ended up as my rival for Mai's affections. I would lose in a heartbeat!

The limo drove us a fair way before letting us off at the entrance to a hotel. Oh, this wasn't the Akasaka hotel, by the way. This was the one in Roppongi. Not like I could tell you what difference the neighborhood made, when it came to hotels. I mean…they were in different physical locations. I guess.

Wait a minute. Mai and I were still in our school uniforms. Would that be a problem? What if they let Mai in but detained me at the entrance? That wouldn't happen, right? Right?!

Mentally, I was flipping the freak out, but I tried to keep my cool in front of my sister. I acted like this? Pssh. This was nothin'. I did this all the time.

"There's nothing to be so nervous about," Mai said.

Um, hello? I wasn't nervous?! I automatically grabbed my chest before my heart flew up and out of my throat, but then I heard my sister say behind me, "R-right, sorry."

Oh. Mai was talking to Haruna. Right, because I came here all the time. I was basically a regular. (I most certainly was not.)

"It's just," my sister said, "I've never been anywhere like this before."

"Don't worry," Mai said. "This is a casual venue. We're here simply to relax and have a little chat."

My sister sneaked a quick glance at me. She looked like she needed someone to come bail her out. So I didn't flinch away (I didn't, I tell you!) and smiled too.

"Uh-huh," I said. "You know, you aren't the only one who was intimidated at first. I had cold feet when I first came here too. Mai told me out of nowhere to put on a dress and come join her for a dinner party, and then it turned out to be here."

"I'm sorry about all that," said Mai.

"Nah, it was chill. I was just hecka nervous being around so many pretty people." (That part was true.)

Mai and I giggled obnoxiously with one another for my sister's benefit. Well? What'd she think of me now, huh? Huh?!

My sister whispered, so quietly only I could hear, "Calm down, Haruna. I have to show up Oneechan!"

Excuse me? What was that last part? Look, I was only acting this calm because I was a pro at being put in Situations by Mai.

Anyway, we finally went inside and found the hotel restaurant—a sorta relaxed buffet setup. I saw a lot of young couples and families with kids. Honestly, it was basically a kinda (Scratch that. Majorly) upscale

version of a diner. Or at least it had that vibe. I could handle this. Totally!

My sister's eyes lit up. "This is incredible! Is it all-you-can-eat?"

Mai chuckled. "That it is. Once we've been seated, feel free to pick out whatever strikes your fancy."

"Are you sure? This must cost a ton."

Mai giggled again at my terrified sis. "Money is no object. You're Renako's sister, so you are like family to me. Let me treat you."

Stars shone in my sister's eyes. "You're the best sister-in-law I could ever ask for!"

I couldn't help myself. "She's your what now?"

My sister gave me a thumbs-up, all but saying "You lucked out on this one, Oneechan!" My sister sure could turn on the charm when free food was involved. Kind of like someone else I knew (me).

"Oh, if only I'd gone to club practice today," my sister moaned. "I would have been so hungry!"

Mai smiled at her. My sister was clearly enjoying herself. Not like I was complaining—it was nice to see her in a good mood. It also meant she'd be more likely to finally open up, right? Had to be. *Great job, Mai, you found the perfect scheme: bait her with food!*

Okay, that was a bad way to put it. It was more like the notion of everyone coming together around the dinner table. Since time immemorial, people had been sharing meals as a means of communication. Some even said you needed to share food to truly understand your friends. Come to think of it, Mai invited me out to eat every time our relationship hit a snag. No wonder she was trying the same thing with my sister.

Anyway, a waiter arrived and took us to our table. Mai stood up,

hellbent on destroying the guard of my little sister, she of the insignificant financial resources.

“Let’s go, Haruna-kun,” she said. “Don’t worry about being polite. Feel free to try whatever looks good.”

“Okay! Oh man, that roast beef looks killer.”

Both of them sailed off to the buffet, and I followed a step or two behind.

You know, if I did marry Mai, she’d probably dote on my sis just like this. Which I wasn’t too keen on. I thought Mai had feelings for me, not my sister! Oh, whatever. It wasn’t like we were ever getting married to begin with.

Yeah, you know what? I needed to get some of that roast beef too.

The food was to die for—not like I’d expect anything less from a place that had Mai’s favor.

My sister sighed and fell back into her chair with a look of pure delight on her face. “I can’t eat another bite.”

She’d gone back for seconds. And thirds. And fourths. What’s more, she practically licked the plate clean in between each round. I had no idea where she was packing it all away, considering how skinny she was. Point was, this girl knew how to EAT.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it so much,” Mai said.

“You know it. If no one was watching, I’d go run laps around the hotel for ten minutes and then jump back in for round two. But it’d be rude to ditch you in the meantime.”

Mai giggled.

Thanks to the incessant stream of hotel waiters whisking plates away, my sister’s side of the table was perfectly clean. But I would

wager she ate enough for at least two people. Second helpings of roast beef, premier omelet, sautéed abalone, beef pie… We were enjoying the feel of our full stomachs over post-meal coffee and tea, and right now, I was engaged in a serious debate with my stomach about going back for one last dessert.

But that internal discussion was cut short when Mai said, “Well now, I hear you’re not going to school anymore.”

My sister gulped. “Uh, well…yeah, kinda!” She rubbed the back of her head bashfully and giggled. “Gosh, here I thought you were just treating me to a nice dinner. I should have known that was too good to be true.”

“I would be perfectly happy to establish a habit of regular dinner dates with you. Would you be amenable?”

My sister’s eyes lit up. “Get out. Are you for real?” Then she caught sight of me and rushed to shake her head. “But that wouldn’t be fair to Oneechan. I can’t hog you all to myself! Here, let’s have one dinner date to every two of hers.”

“Isn’t that an awful lot?” I said.

But she ignored my sisterly words of wisdom. Seriously? One dinner with Mai for every two of our dates? Girl! She was tripping, right?

“Of course,” said Mai. “But why aren’t you going to school?”

“Uh. I guess it’s a question of, why do I need to go to school in the first place?” My sister cobbled together a gloating grin, which Mai responded to with a pleasant smile of her own.

“Well, I’m sure you have your reasons,” Mai said. “I certainly don’t think it’s necessary to force you to go. But I’m more concerned about why you’re choosing to respond with these smart-aleck arguments. Your poor family is worried about you, but you won’t tell them what’s wrong.

I don't think that's particularly nice of you, if you must know. Other people have a right to stick their noses into your business when they care about you."

"Um." My sister looked everywhere but at Mai. "Why does it matter? I'm still keeping up with my studies."

"Which is an admirable accomplishment. But that's not what school is all about, is it? Book learning is but one benefit of schooling, and studying at home cannot make up the deficit. As much as I would like to applaud your efforts, I cannot say with a straight face that you are doing yourself any favors."

"Urk."

Hot damn. Because Mai paid for her meal, my sister was trapped between a rock and a hard place. Just like that, she had my sister on the back foot. Mai sometimes let her feelings get away from her, which made it easy for people (me) to get the wrong idea about her. But deep down, she was a super rational person. She had a strong value system—people should be ABC; people should do XYZ—upheld by a highly ethical core. Whenever Maizilla came out, she stomped every argument flat, no matter how carefully constructed. Even Satsuki-san was no match for her.

Then on top of all that, the Mai persona was a steamroller. She literally just sat there and gave off an aura that was the epitome of cool. People took one look at that and went, "Welp. Nothing I can do against someone that important." Believe me, that was a thought I was all too familiar with. Once, I had never dreamed of dating anyone. And now I was dating *Mai*. You could imagine just how much of a stranglehold she had on me.

I told her she didn't need to bend over backward, and she wasn't. But like. Maybe, just maybe, we were getting close to unravelling the

secret of my sister's truancy.

Speaking of said sister, I wished I could have been a fly on the wall of her brain after she heard that speech. She looked dumbfounded for a couple of seconds before she finally accepted that she couldn't escape her fate.

So she sighed. "There's no giving you the slip, huh?"

Then she turned to me. "Sorry, Oneechan. Can you give me and Mai some space?"

"Huh?" I said, bewildered.

"Please?" My sister placed her hands together in a pleading gesture.

I mean, giving her space wasn't an issue. It was just, what for? You know? I could feel the question mark popping up over my head. Maybe it was something too hard to tell her family. Or maybe she felt she could open up only to Mai.

"Would you be a dear and give us a few moments alone?" Mai asked.

I nodded. "Uh, sure. Okay. I'll make a quick run to the bathroom."

"Oh, hold on." Mai pointed. "If that restroom is full, you might try that other one over there."

"Oh. Okay."

I didn't quite get what that was all about, but I nodded and got up. After I took a few steps, I turned back. Neither said a word. They looked like they were waiting for me to leave entirely. What the heck? Some weird feeling—loneliness?—welled up from the depths of my brain. I wasn't sure why I felt that way, but then again, I really wasn't the most emotionally intelligent person to begin with.

Incidentally, neither restroom seemed full, but I didn't put too much thought into it and headed off to the one Mai had indicated. And then, as I was halfway down the hallway, I realized I could hear my sister saying, "And then, like, when that happened… *Mumble, mumble, mumbl*e. So what else was I supposed to do? *Mumble mumble mumble.*" Thanks to one of those ornamental plant divider thingies, I hadn't noticed that this bathroom was directly behind our table. If I pricked my ears, I could hear snippets of their conversation.

Ah ha. Had Mai planned all this from the start? Was that why she picked this hotel? Holy cow. Mai was out here playing 4D chess on my behalf.

"Hm," I heard Mai say. "*Mumble mumble.* So you're saying… *mumble mumble.*"

I stood stock-still. I could only half hear what they were talking about. My next move was now entirely up to me: Listen in? Give them privacy? There was a serious tone in my sister's voice that I pretty much never heard her use, ever. I knew eavesdropping on her in such a moment of vulnerability was really, really wrong…but I was also *really, really* worried about my sister. And beggars couldn't be choosers. If I had a better grasp of the situation, then maybe I could do something for her, even if she never found out. My sister's precious junior high years were slipping away, minute by minute. And that just didn't sit right with me.

I balled my hands into fists. I had to. It was for my sister's own good. I had to. I had to…

Maybe ten minutes later, my sister texted me, "Hey, I'm done." When I got back, I found them both pretty much as I had left them. I knew they were trying to act like Shit hadn't just gone down, but I

didn't know what the Shit was. You know?

"Hi there, Oneechan," my sister said.

"Hi there, yourself."

"Sorry we took so long."

"Don't mention it." I took a sip of my now cold herbal tea. But even with my whistle wetted, I still found it difficult to get my words out. "Are you guys, uh. Finished?"

"Yeah, for now."

"Huh. Okay."

I didn't meet Mai's eye. Instead, I looked down at my lap. I felt stuffed with unpleasant emotions, not unlike the sensation of a full stomach after a meal.

My sister smiled like nothing was wrong. "That hit the spot," she said. "Should we start heading home?"

Mai took us back in the limo and dropped us off at our doorstep.

"Thank you so much!" my sister said as she gave Mai a huge bow. "You're the best."

After Haruna went inside, Mai said to me, "And this is where we must part." Her voice carried a soft, gentle timbre. "Good night, Renako."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled under my breath.

"Hm?"

"After everything you set up for me, I just…I just couldn't bring myself to eavesdrop on you guys." I formed tight fists with my hands and hugged them to my chest. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize to me. No, so long as you made your

choice, you don't owe me any apologies at all."

I took a good look at Mai and the limousine behind her. Her beautiful golden locks seemed to gleam in the starlight. It was almost like she was shining with some inner light of her own.

God, Mai was really, really kind. Look at her, telling me she didn't need my apologies. But I disagreed. She did need my apologies, and so I shook my head.

"No, I do. I don't know what I was thinking. I should have listened in if it would've helped my sister. But I couldn't even do that."

Honestly, I'd been nothing but a real pain in the butt lately. I knew that my sister spilled her heart to Mai because Mai was so awesome like that. Anyone would open up to her. I, on the other hand, was a failure of a big sister. If my sister clammed up any harder around me, she would've made pearls. I knew all that, and I was okay with that. Or I least I thought I was okay with that. But I just… I just…

"I don't…think I'm good enough to listen to her," I said.

"Oh, Renako." Mai placed her hand on the top of my head. "We all have things we're capable of. And, conversely, things we aren't."

That hit, and it hit hard. I thought she was trying to cheer me up—tell me that there was no point fussing over something that was plain impossible for me—but it only widened the abyss inside me.

But that actually wasn't quite what Mai meant. Because she said, "What I did for your sister, anyone else could have done. However, there are some things that are all up to you."

"Wait, what are you talking about?" I lifted my head.

"Like the way you always take my hand so sweetly," Mai said. "There are things you can do that I simply can't." She smiled at me. "What, do you think so badly of Satsuki and Ajisai too, just because they

failed to convince your sister?"

Now I suddenly found the ability to speak up. "No way!" I didn't think any less of Satsuki-san or Ajisai-san just because they couldn't do everything. They were plenty capable. In fact, there were tons of things only they could do, as I knew very well. They were incredible people, and because I knew how amazing they were, I didn't think poorly of them. Just because they were, what, not omnipotent?

"The same applies to you," Mai said. "Yes, but I suppose Haruna-kun did let me into her confidence. I could tell you everything, but I fear it would do little to alleviate your worries."

"There's no need. She'd just get mad at you."

"Still, I can tell you one thing." Mai ran a hand through my hair before it came to a rest cradling my cheek. "Haruna-kun appreciates everything you do."

"Wait, me? What did I do?"

Mai just giggled, the tease. "You're so oblivious when it comes to yourself. If you have any bad points to speak of, that might be one of them."

I didn't know what to say in response to that. What the heck was she laughing for?

Was it true, though? Were there some things that were all up to me? Not gonna lie, that really hit home. Couldn't have told you why, but it did. You know, Mai was always telling me the things I needed to hear. She always supported me by having faith in me whenever I couldn't believe in myself. Man, you know what? *Thanks, Mai.*

"But…" I began. There was something almost too surreal, too dreamlike in my voice. "Sure, there are some things that are beyond me right now. But I want to learn to be able to do them someday. That's why I'm trying my best, you know?"

“I know.”

My voice was so thin it could have blown away on the autumn breeze, but Mai caught it and held it firm. She put her arms around me and held me too.

“I believe in you, Renako,” she said.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Now, goodnight. Give my love to your family.”

And with that, Mai and her limousine drove away. I stood there and watched the receding taillights for a good few moments. Then I clenched my fists. There were a lot of unpleasant, muggy feelings inside of me, but now things felt just a little bit better. Mai’s kindness made all the difference.

It was time to strike while the iron was hot. This tiny ember of courage in my heart would be extinguished in seconds! *Run, Renako, run!*

All but barreling across the floor, I dashed to my sister’s room and barged in without knocking. She yelped in surprise—I’d just stormed in on her changing.

“What do you want, Oneechan?!” she snapped.

I stood there, the door open and forgotten behind me. I didn’t have the faintest clue how to start this conversation. Crap. Courage was all very well, but I needed a game plan to go with it! Awkwardness creeped in with the same steady pace as the ticking of a timebomb. Um. Uh. Ack.

“Uh…you tell me,” I said.

My half-naked sister gave me a death glare. Ruh-roh. I could see it now: *Pervert barges in on a changing eighth grader with no purpose but ogling her!* I would’ve asked her if she really had such little faith in me, but, well, I knew the answer to that one…

Oh well, what the hell. I spread my arms wide and said, “J-just look at you! You’ll catch your death of cold running around in that getup. Look how late it is! March your butt to the bathroom and get clean, missy!”

“Uh, that’s literally what I was in the middle of doing, but go off.”

“Ah. Well. Then uh. Um. See here!” And then, as I panicked, a truly horrible sentence came flying out of my mouth. “Let’s bathe together!”

I unclasped my bra hooks and pulled my bra off. How, oh how, did I end up here?

“What were you even thinking?” my sister whined as she shimmied out of her sports bra. “There’s no room in here.”

“Y-you’re not wrong.”

The changing area in our bathroom was undeniably a cramped fit for two people. Made you wonder how we managed to wash our faces at the same time every morning, jostling each other for space as we went.

And while you’re wondering, here’s another thing to consider: why

the hell didn't my sister say no? She went "What the heck?" like I was making some kind of lame, creepy joke but then followed that up with a casual, "Yeah, sure." I would never understand how extroverts like her thought. Or maybe that wasn't to blame. You know how she did all those sports? Maybe she was used to showering with her teammates. Yeah, that could be it. Wait. Did that mean she bathed with all her senpais and kouhai-chans after every practice? Showing off her naked bod? Seeing *their* naked bods?! *Dang, Little Sis,* I thought. *You're on that freak shit.*

"Uh, Oneechan?" said the freaky little sis in question.

"Huh? R-right, I'm moving! Sorry! Getting undressed as we speak."

"What's your problem? I was just gonna say, we're out of shampoo. Go grab the refill bottle."

"Oh. Okay. Will do."

I tiptoed over to the cabinet and got out the big bottle we refilled our shampoo from.

Ladies and gentlemen, we were in hot water. My sister had a bigger (bathing adjacent to a) body count than me, and it was making me wilt like a dying flower. Even though I was two years older!

Off went the undies.

How else was I supposed to feel in front of my sis, if not embarrassed? All up to me?! Get a load of that BS. I could count the number of times I'd bathed with another girl on one hand…albeit just barely!

Ugh. I had so totally made the wrong choice here.

I hunched my shoulders and tiptoed into the bathroom, feeling like I was reading an adventure VN with nothing but bad ends. "D-don't mind me," I said as I opened the door and got blasted with the sight of

my naked sister standing in the shower.

She faced away from me, her back glistening with soap. Her butt was toned like nobody's business. It was all those sports, I'm telling you. This girl had a baaaw-dy. She was lithe from head to toe like a fawn you'd see at the zoo. She was perfectly trim (unlike yours truly, even though we ostensibly came from the same DNA) and delightfully petite.

"How the heck do you not gain weight with an appetite like yours?" I asked her.

My sister turned her head over her shoulder to look at me. "What do you mean? I just work out, duh."

Then her eyes widened. "Holy shit. Your boobs are ginormous."

"Hello?! You see them all the time."

"Yeah, but not naked. There's more *oomph* when I see 'em up close and personal."

"What is this, front row tickets to a walrus show?" I groused.

While my sister refilled the shampoo, I scrubbed myself down. Here was where the real problem began: fitting in the bathtub in our all-too humble home. I didn't know how on earth we were going to get both of us in there, but my little sister just climbed right on in with me. Actually, "climbed" isn't the word. More like "splooshed."

"Watch it," I said as the bathwater sloshed my way.

My sister laughed, unconcerned. She had her hair tied up, you see.

"Move your legs," she said. "They're in my way."

"Your legs are in *my* way," I snapped back. "What'd you go and get so big for anyway?"

"Are you trying to use your big boobs to bully me out of the tub?"

"No!"

Miraculously, we managed to slot ourselves into place and settle down facing each other, our backs up against the sides of the tub. Our legs were all over each other's, but it wasn't awkward. I mean, it was just my sister. I wished I could be, like, 130 cm, but it was chill otherwise.

All I needed to do was wash my hair and then peace out, but that wasn't the point of this bathing thing. So I started to feel nervous in a whole different way. How to go about starting this conversation? I figured leading with small talk might be my best shot.

"Oh hey," I said. "Your bandages are gone."

"Hm? Oh yeah. I guess."

My sister's hands looked fine now. She showed me them, front and back. They were still smaller than mine somehow. Had to have been those darn sports of hers.

"When did your boobs start getting big?" she asked me.

"Huh? I dunno. I don't remember. I feel like they were already pretty chonky by the time I was your age."

"Dang."

I leered. "What's that? Haruna-chan, are you jealous? Don't you wish you were me? Hm? Hmm?"

"Not at all," she said. "I literally could not care less."

"Ugh! The betrayal."

"Honestly, if I had giant tits like you, they'd just get in my way when I play badminton."

Darn that girl! At this rate, all her boob fat would turn into muscle!

"You know," I said, "we've both gotten pretty big. Like, we've grown up, I mean."

My sister smirked before relenting and acknowledging with a nod that I was right.

“When was the last time we bathed together?” I asked. “Elementary school?”

“What, you don’t remember? It was when you had that big screw-up.”

“Which one?” So much for my powers of recollection. I didn’t remember that at all. Ugh, she was going to think I was slow in the head! I stared holes into my sis and willed myself with all my might to remember—and that’s when it hit me.

“Oh yeah…when I spilled the milk everywhere,” I said.

“Yup. You tried to cut the end of the carton off, but you were gripping it so hard the milk shot out everywhere.”

“Ah, right. And we both ended up so drenched Mom and Dad shoved us into the bath together.”

I was in upper elementary school at the time, back when my sister and I attended the same school. Perhaps that was the genesis of our fated roles as shrewd little sister and bungler big sister.

“Sorry,” I said. “That was all my fault.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m used to you screwing things up and catching me in the crossfire.”

“Now see here, you little turd—”

Here came the insults again.

As I looked at my sister, I remembered how she used to be back when we were little. Even though I was the older one, I was always getting her into some trouble or another. I didn’t know how other families worked, but I thought we got along relatively well. Maybe. Or maybe that was just because my sister was such a stand-up individual.

See, she was even nice enough to go along with my weird bathing idea. When I was in my own truancy phase, she'd snub me or give me the evil eye, but at least she still treated me decently. I would never have become the person I was now without her help. But I'd never been there for her like an older sister should.

In spite of that—actually, because of that, I needed to work as hard as I could and become the very best big sister I could be.

So I exclaimed, "Hey, Haruna!"

"Hm? What is it?"

Welp, blurted that one out. Whoops.

I scooted closer to my sis. I was so close, I could see myself reflected in her eyes as I took her hand under the water.

"Y-you're not being bullied, are you?!" I demanded in desperation.

"Um. What?"

I probably should have asked that before the rest of the Quintet got involved, but oh well.

"If there's something bad going on at school, and that's why you're not going…I-I know can't do much, but I'm here for you."

You know, I'd never once told my sister why I stopped going to school myself. I just hadn't wanted to go. So I didn't. That was all I said, and I stuck to my guns, repeating the same story to my mom, dad, and sister. I wasn't being bullied, you know? Sure, my classmates ostracized me, but that wasn't the end of the world. Right? I didn't want to come out and spill my feelings only for people to go, "Huh? But that's not so bad." I felt ashamed of being so insecure. My insecurities made me weak. Pathetic. I didn't want people to say, "Well, that's just how life goes." Because that would just have been making fun of me.

So if Haruna was going through some tough times now…

…I had to say, “You probably think you can’t talk about it with anyone. But hey. I’ll listen. I won’t laugh at you. I’m not gonna be like, ‘Seriously? That’s all?’ So I just…”

My emotions were driving now, and my voice rose to a fevered pitch, echoing here in the bathroom. Haruna’s eyes grew wide, making the reflection of me and my flushed cheeks even easier to see. And then, like a popping balloon, my sister exploded into laughter.

“What the heck are you going on about, Oneechan?” she said.

Excuse me?! “Wh-wh-wh-wha?!” Was it not painfully obvious?

I was so baffled I couldn’t speak, and my sister just kept cackling away. “Like I said,” she managed to get out between guffaws, “nothing’s going on. There’s really, really nothing.”

“But! But! But!!!”

My sister sighed. “You crack me up, Oneechan.”

Thanks?!

“Come on,” she said. “Do I *look* like someone who’d get bullied so hard they stopped going to school?”

“I dunno! That’s why I’m asking.”

“If anyone bullied me hard enough to make me quit school, I’d give them as good as I got. At that point, it’d be more like me getting suspended for fighting.”

“That’s not something to be proud of,” I told her. Then, almost like I was pleading, I gave her a long look and asked, “So, you’re okay? You sure?”

“Uh, yeah?”

I analyzed her every movement, searching for some kind of sign. I refused to let anything escape me. “So you’re *sure* sure… You’re positive that you’re not being bullied or anything? That I don’t have anything to

worry about?"

"Yup." She squeezed my hand. "I swear on the roast beef we had today. I'm doing okay."

Well, if she had that kind of attitude, there was no doubt about it. My sister was being her usual self.

"Okay," I said. Weirdly, I couldn't help but frown as I watched her. If she was hiding how she really felt, then I certainly couldn't tell. Normally, my sister made fun of me, one-upped me, and drove me up the darn wall, but the thing was…I wanted to believe she wouldn't lie to me. Not about something like this.

"And if was being bullied," my sister said, "what would you even do about it?"

"Huh? Isn't that obvious? I'd go beat the stuffing out of them. Duh!"

I leapt up, sloshing half the water out of the tub in the process. I didn't even have to think. I just put my dukes up and declared, "How dare they hurt my dear baby sis! And I'd bring a kitchen knife, and—no, I'd borrow a Taser from my friend's mom!"

"You're so full of it." My sister smirked and brushed me off like I was kidding. "I like the part where you got so carried away you called me your 'dear baby sis.' Especially considering you don't know how to fight…but I guess it's no wonder you sound like an extremist with all those shooter games you play."

"Ack!"

This girl was too quick for her own good, coming up with one zinger after another. Where was the harm in letting me posture a little, huh?

"A-anyway," I said. "It's the thought that counts."

“Mm-hmm. I’m so grateful.” She grinned. “I just gotta let you off the hook. You’re so cute I can’t help it.”

“What?” I said.

“That’s a you thing. You always say that. That, and the protection from misfortune, illogical love crap. Remember?”

Um. Did I say that? When?

Oh. Now I remembered. “Oh my god!” I inadvertently exclaimed. “That was something completely different.”

“Yeah, you sounded like such a goober,” my sister teased. “You probably got it out of some manga.”

“No, you’re missing important context!”

That wasn’t meant for my little sister. Well, it was, but not for my *little sister* little sister. I was saying it to Ajisai-san! Shoot. There was no way I could explain that Ajisai-san and I had an understanding—you know, the thing where she called me her big sister and let me baby her like a five-year-old. My sister would think I was a weirdo.

“Oh?” Haruna sneered. “What kinda context are we talking?”

My lips trembled. “N-nothing. I was. Uh. Talking about my dear, dear baby sister…”

Oh, the disgrace. Oh, the humiliation. Why was she looking at me like that? Alas, such was the cross I would bear to avoid besmirching Ajisai-san’s honor!

“I guess it makes sense,” my sister said. “You know how much I do for you and all—going to the salon, getting you clothes, teaching you how to talk, fixing your posture and stuff. Plus, I helped you out during that recent school competition, right?”

“Yeah…” I admitted. It came out sounding like a whimper. “I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“Attachment issues much?”

“Shaddup.”

It felt like I was in a jacuzzi—I was seriously sitting in the hot seat!

“That was all just a slip of the tongue,” I said. “Forget you heard anything!”

“Are you kidding me? That’s perfect Oneechan roasting material.”

“I’ll buy you more ice cream if you drop it!”

“Today’s your lucky day, then.” She flashed me obnoxious double peace signs in an effort to piss me off even more.

“You little brat,” I said. “Here I was being nice and worrying about you, and this is the thanks I get?”

“No one asked you to worry about me,” she pointed out.

“How could I not? You announced completely out of the blue you weren’t going to school. Anyone would’ve been concerned. You’re my sister!” I slapped the water for emphasis.

She gave me a funny, puzzled look and then snickered. “It’s fine. Worry about yourself, you know? You have your own glow-up and good friends to pay attention to.”

“I do, but that’s not the point.”

“Seriously, you should hold on to your friends. They’re good people. Probably better than you deserve, TBH.”

“Honestly? Yeah.”

I couldn’t help but nod at these words of wisdom from my life coach Haruna-senpai. Which one of us was the older sister again?

Just then, my sister stepped out of the tub and twisted the shower knob, effectively ending the conversation.

“You could be reborn a hundred times, and you’d never end up with friends like that again,” she taunted.

“Look, can you keep your comments to yourself?!”

Even if they were true!

My sister laughed long and hard. That was the first time mother dearest had heard her laugh since she’d stopped going to school…or whatever. You know that kind of hackneyed crap. And in return, my mother’s other daughter suffered a major blow to her self-esteem!

Group Chat Name:
Elvira's Warning (2)
Part 1

Satsuki: Hey.

Satsuki: What do you think you're doing?

Youko: who me??? lololol

Youko: whyre you texting me out of nowhere? its scawy owo

Satsuki: (I am electing to ignore that.) I thought you were going to watch everything play out before you took any action. Whatever happened to that plan?

Youko: aww dont be mad at me :(((i was just chatting w/ her!!!

Youko: oooooh i know what this is. is this cause shes your gf?

Youko: even tho shes fourtiming you, you dont want her talking to other girls huh?

Satsuki: You are barking up the wrong tree altogether. I simply think you ought to stay in your lane.

Youko: aww but you said i could do whatevvey floats my boat

Satsuki: Provided you do not sabotage my efforts, thank you very much. Do I really have to spell that part out for you?

Youko: yeah yeah whatever. look, im only doing this for the $$$. and i get paid when my job is done right

Youko: so long as i get my paycheck? im happy. we cool?

Satsuki: Yes. I'm glad we had this talk. Make sure you keep this in mind moving forward.

Youko: oh wait one more thing. i wanna test something out.

Satsuki: Should I be concerned?

Youko: stop being so srs. its nothing huge

Youko: but jsyk, im the one who ran that background check on amaori renako to begin with

Satsuki: I hate to repeat myself, but if I must—

Satsuki: Once again, let me stress that you have nothing to do with this matter whatsoever. Stay. In. Your. Lane.

Youko: whatevew you say owo

Youko: you know what? theres something special about renako. i kinda dig it

Youko: like you just cant get her off your mind. you get sucked in and you start caring about her

Youko: guess its that black magic she's got. thats how she suckered in all da ladiez

Youko: im almost thinking like…when all this is over, maybe i should be there to console her through the heartbreak

Youko: like that aftercare thing

Youko: hbu koto-san? what do you think?

Youko: ? you there? did you fall asleep?

Youko: koto-san you good?

Chapter 3:
There's No Freaking Way I Can Help My Sister!

"PLEASE, HARUNA-SENPAI!" I begged and bowed like my life depended on it. "You have to help me!"

Haruna-san—back then, halfway through her first year of junior high—sat in front of me with her arms folded. "You want to reinvent your image for high school?" she repeated.

"Yes, exactly."

She scowled at me. "I'm down to help, but are you sure about this?"

"Huh? Uh…what do you mean?"

I peered at her with trembling eyes through the gaps in my shaggy, unkempt bangs.

My sister's lips quirked into a frown. "Look, I don't have a ton of time these days. I just started a new sport. I'll help, but I'm not going to hold your hand the whole way through. You sure you aren't gonna throw in the towel once the going gets tough?"

"Um."

"So?" she pressed. "How serious are you?"

I struggled for words. I opened and closed my mouth like a goldfish. I couldn't come up with a convincing response, and honestly? It was pathetic. I broke out into a cold sweat. I mean, I didn't have any other friends. I didn't have anyone else I could turn to. If my little sister gave up on me too, I'd have nothing.

“I-I can do it!” I promised. “I’ll work really, really hard. I’ll try my best!”

I wrenched my head up and looked my sister in the eyes. She was my only hope.

I could only imagine what I looked like to her. A desperate mess, maybe?

She heaved an enormous sigh before brandishing a finger in my direction. “First things first,” she said, “we gotta do something about that hair.”

“Huh?”

“We need to get you to a beauty salon so you can ditch the emo haircut. Then when you can finally *see* again, we’ll take the next step. Listen up: we’re not going to half-ass this. If you run out on me sobbing partway through, you’re dead to me. Got it?”

I jolted to attention and bowed to her as deep as I could go. “Thank you so, so much.”

And from then on, Haruna bailed me out of one scrape after another. The question was…what did I ever do for her in return?

***

A couple of days after the bathing incident, my sister announced over a game in her room, “It’s just for two months.”

“What is?”

She ignored me and went on. “And can you get off my back? You’ve been bugging me nonstop ever since the other day. Honestly? It’s kinda obnoxious.”

“Excuse me?!” I whipped around to stare at her wearing the face

of someone whose bungee cords snapped midjump. “I’m not *obnoxious*. I just…thought you might be bored being all by yourself.”

“But did I ask? Literally the second you get home, you’re at my door begging me to play something with you. This is, like, clingy girlfriend behavior.”

“Hello?” I was worried about my poor baby sister going through a mental health crisis! Clingy girlfriend? In what universe?

“Fine,” she said. “Clingy oneechan behavior.”

“Yeah? Because I’m your oneechan?!”

“If this keeps escalating, pretty soon you’ll bring in a pillow and ask to sleep with me.”

“I would never go that far, and you know it.”

“Wouldn’t you, though?” She recrossed her legs on her cushion and frowned at me. “There’s no telling what you might do. If a hot guy asked you out, you’d wait until he fell in love and moved in before kicking him to the curb.”

“Who the heck do you think I am?”

“I’m just repeating what Mom says.”

“Wh—no, you’re not!” I shouted. “What the hell, Mom?!”

My social standing (or lack thereof) in this darn household made me want to riot. I wasn’t going to. But like. You get it. (I was the eldest daughter, after all. Good, respectable members of society didn’t flip out like that.)

“Anyway,” I said, “what was that two months thing?”

“Oh. Just how long I’m going to be away from school,” she said, like it was no big deal at all.

Before I could think, I said, “Wait, what?”

My sister repeated, like she was dealing with a total cretin, “I literally just said, I’m only staying away from school for two months. Then I’ll go back.”

She said it with the exact same casual tone you’d use to say, “Oh yeah, I missed last week’s episode of that one TV show.”

“F-for real?” I said. “Huh? Hold on. I thought you were giving up on school forever. What about the…you know. The thing that started all this? Isn’t that still around? And why two months?”

“Jeez, since when were we playing Twenty Questions? One at a time.”

I stopped my barrage and, very carefully, managed to ask, “Why… now?” I was so shaken up, it was the first thing that came to mind.

My sister looked at me like the answer was obvious. “Because you’re annoying the hell out of me. You’re basically stuck to me like glue.”

“Oh. Um.” I put a hand on my chest. “Good thing I’m obnoxious…?”

“No, it’s not a good thing at all.”

That’s when it hit me. “Wait, if I get even more annoying, will that drive you out of the house faster?”

“Yeah, down to the hardware store. To get a lock for my bedroom door.”

“But you’d still have to come out of your room sometime, right? What about dinner? Or going to the bathroom and stuff?”

“Oh, no—for your door.”

“What?! Are you trying to lock me in?” *Hello, police? I’m being held captive!* I mentally pleaded. “Okay, next question,” I said. “Why two months?”

“No comment,” she said.

“All right. Then, what made you choose that particular length of time?”

“No comment.”

“You really aren’t going to answer anything, huh?”

“I just said to give me questions one at a time,” she pointed out. “I never said I’d answer them.”

Well, fair enough. That was technically playing by the rules. But this was too important for her to get away with such nonsense.

Yet before I could say anything, my sister pointed straight at me and told me, “On that note, I want you to stop acting like, ‘Oh my god, I need to do something about this!!!’ You’re driving me up the wall.”

I stared at her finger, just centimeters from my nose, and nodded woodenly. “O-okay.”

“Good. Glad we’ve come to an agreement. I’m going to study now, so leave me alone.”

“S-sure thing.”

She shooed me out of her room and slammed the door shut behind her. I stared back at it for a few moments.

“This has to be a good development,” I said aloud. “Gotta be. Right?”

As sudden and surprising as it was, I guess I’d technically achieved my goal. But for some reason, something about this just didn’t sit right with me.

***

In the meantime, I texted the Quintet group chat that my sister planned to go back to school in two months. In turn, they informed me that my sister had already reached out privately and told all of them. They each got a message reading something to the effect of, “You’ll probably hear it from my sister sooner or later, but I’m planning to go back to school in two months. You don’t need to worry about me. I’m doing just fine!” (Except for Kaho-chan. My sister didn’t have her contact info.) When I later checked in with Mai one-on-one, she told me that my sister had given her the same spiel during their talk at the restaurant. Basically, this wasn’t Haruna trying to stall for time or anything. She actually meant it.

Which meant I’d lost my chance to do anything for my sister. …Or had I? In the end, I still didn’t know what caused this truancy. I felt like I’d been dropped into a mystery novel and didn’t have all the pieces to put the puzzle together.

Of course, that was because this was only the beginning of the ordeal. Understanding was to come later.

***

I muttered and hummed and tried to work my way through the case all the way home from school. For all intents and purposes, there was nothing I could do for my sister at this stage.

Incidentally, I had to wonder: was teaching my sister to play games for her sake? Or mine? She seemed pretty into it, but I had difficulty picturing my little sister getting into shooters and being a lifelong gamer like me. To her, video games were just one more way to pass the time.

See, here’s the thing. I felt too frustrated to just sit and wait out

these two months. Even if I tried to put a positive spin on it, I couldn't give myself a pat on the back for, what—convincing her to go back to school eventually? (Although that sounded like something Ajisai-san would say.) I really hadn't done anything. Was there nothing I *could* do?

Like, what if I just straight-up asked her what the deal was? Okay, never mind. She'd just go, "Would you get off my case? I'm trying to study." Which made sense. Testing season was just around the corner. *But man…I don't know,* I thought.

I flashed my commuter pass to get through the ticket gate and went out to the train platform. My sister still weighed on my mind as I started to pace up and down. Just then, I noticed a girl slumped lifelessly against one of the pillars.

I yelped and ran over to her. This looked all too familiar—especially the silver hair! This could only be one girl!

"Lucie-chan?" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" She moaned, and I cried, "What's wrong? Are you sick?"

I could barely hear her voice, it was so weak. She was causing a scene—okay, so my screaming wasn't helping, but still—though she was in such a bad state I couldn't begin to care.

Between desperate, gasping breaths, she stuttered out, "I'm hungry."

I went silent. The only thing I had on me was the last of the pastries I bought earlier. I pulled it out of my bag and brought it to her lips. The moment it touched her mouth, she chewed it up as fast a pencil sharpener.

[Three minutes later]

"Thank you, Renako-sama," she said. "I'm better now."

"Good!" I said.

She stood up before me, as radiant and pretty as I remembered her. Wasn't she on the verge of death like five minutes ago? What kinda black magic…

Anyway, I said, "What the heck's your problem? Teenage girls don't just collapse in the street in modern day Japan. I thought something police-worthy went down!"

"I was waiting for you to walk by," she said. "And you did. Maybe it's fate."

"Don't start talking about fate when you're so pretty and so… close…"

"Or maybe it's because I sit here every day for hours. That could be it," said Lucie.

"Yeah, that sounds like our winner," I said. "Wait, come again? You've been coming here every day to look for me?"

"Yes," she said matter-of-factly. Yeah, as one does, I guess!

"Um. Why?"

Lucie-chan beamed. It was so bright I could practically see the flowers bursting into bloom right here in the station. Ack! A pretty girl!

"I wanted to play with you," she said. She rummaged in her tote bag for a moment and pulled out a game console. I'm sorry, did I say one? I meant two. Two freaking game consoles. Hello?

"This one," she explained.

"Um. Did you bring those from home?" I asked.

"Yes. With charged batteries too."

She looked pleased with herself—almost too pleased—and me? Consider my gasts well and truly flabbered.

You'd have to be a total weirdo to hang out in the train station all day, hoping to catch me just to play video games. Not that she hadn't

been a weirdo before, but you get what I mean. Still, I guess it made some sense. You know, she just got to Japan, she didn't have any friends, and she enjoyed talking with me that one time. Honestly, I felt kinda honored. I might've done the same thing if I'd been in her shoes. However, my whole body was screaming "Stranger danger!" and it was all I could do to mask that.

Lucie-chan fixed me with a blank stare. She looked like a robot awaiting orders.

"O-okay," I said. "But we can't play here. Why don't we go to the park?"

"Okay, Renako-sama." She picked up her bag in one hand and took mine with the other. "I'm happy to see you."

"Y-you are, huh?"

"Yes. Because we can spend an even longer time together today. I'm happy about that."

I still couldn't get a read on the look in her eyes, but she was so up-front with her affection that my traitorous face took it upon itself to smile. Like, we're all seeing this, right? This girl seemed to really, really like me. Perhaps I was her only friend here in this foreign country, and she clutched at me like a drowning man.

For whatever reason, this reminded me of back when I was in elementary school. I used to boss around my little sister's friends (she had tons of pals even back then) like I was the neighborhood bully. I didn't have any friends in my own age range, see. Just another part of my dark past, one I thought I'd sealed away forever.

Maybe I was so busy riding the big sister hype train that, when I couldn't do anything for my real little sister, I'd started babying Lucie-chan instead. Maybe I was using her as a substitute little sister to prop up my own self-esteem.

I could feel Evil!Renako skulking and snickering in the shadows, so I forced a big, fake grin onto my face as I said, “Okay, here we are!”

I took Lucie-chan to the park near my house that I often stopped at on the way home. We sat down on a bench side by side.

“What game do you want to play?” I asked her, too perky.

“This one,” she said.

She started it up, and I saw that it was the latest hunting action game to get big. Its co-op play was the big draw, and it was easily accessible enough that it targeted everyone—young and old, male and female. Naturally, I hadn’t played it myself. I would play multiplayer games if they had a singleplayer mode too, but when something was billed as only multiplayer, I got kinda wigged out. Why? That’s a long story.

Junior high me looked down at the screen and scoffed. “It says I can play singleplayer, right? Which means *single* player. (Like, I *could* play with other people and get, what? Two percent of the fun? lol who would ever want to do that?) Something something gaming is for everyone—but word to the wise, gaming industry? Don’t forget your core demographic: the loners. Lol. Lmao, even.”

Shut it, you! I told her. *Begone, foul specter, ye who are too stuck in your prejudiced ways! Variety is good for the gaming industry. Besides, you like party games, right? It’s good to have games you can play with friends!*

“Okay!” I said. “Sounds like a plan. I’ve never played this before, so I’m hyped.”

“Yay,” said Lucie-chan.

I jabbed the power button in an effort to dispel the last of those deep-set and nonsensical convictions. I made a quick account for myself and booted the game up.

“By the way,” I said, “you didn’t just happen to have two consoles lying around, right?”

“No. I bought a new one for this.”

“A-ah. I see. That, uh, sure is a way to spend money. Actually, I know someone else who throws cash around like that. She’s so rich she can dump a couple dozen thousand yen on a game and only play it once.”

“Don’t worry,” said Lucie-chan with a beaming grin. “I charged it to my credit card.”

Wait, that was even worse! “Isn’t that still coming out of your bank account?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“It’s not a magic wand! You can’t just give it a wave and expect everything to fall into your lap for free!”

Lucie-chan looked up from the game and glanced skyward at the fluffy white clouds drifting along in the autumn breeze.

“Come to think of it, I guess I don’t know much about finances,” she admitted.

“Ah.”

On one hand: same. Me. Big mood. On the other hand, Lucie-chan was already a Full-Fledged Member of Society. How the heck was she getting by?

“You get gold every time you play a match in the game,” she said.

“T-true. The more effort you put in, the more you get out of it.”

“But this would prove unsustainable in real life, for money is not the same as endlessly reproducible digital bullion. It would lead to an oversaturation of currency in the economy, causing runaway inflation, skyrocketing costs of goods, and an eventual decline in average QOL.

Right?"

"Whoa. For someone who doesn't know much about finance, you're quick on the draw."

Lucie-chan put a hand to her mouth. "Oh, I see," she whispered to herself. "Money holds no inherent value. It's just a social construct…"

At this point, she was talking things so far beyond my understanding I didn't have the heart to ask what she meant. This girl may have been ignorant as all get out, but she connected the dots at light speed.

"Okay," she said. "I see. I offer services of high demand and low supply, which has earned me a large amount of personal capital thus far."

"Gotcha. The free market," I said, flexing every buzzword I knew. I felt like a red panda standing up on its hind legs to try and look bigger and scarier than it really was. "The general theory of states and market competition something-something. That thing."

Then I rushed to change the subject. I may not have known my economics, but any kid could talk about video games.

"Anyway. Let's play already. Check out the character I made!"

"Okay," she said. "I'm ready too."

She showed me her character. Silver hair, similar build—heck, even the character's name was Lucie. (I think. She had the Latin alphabet turned on, not any of the Japanese keyboards.) Lucie-chan was clearly one of those people who gets to a character creator and just makes themselves. I could vibe with that. I was the same way, see. I used to model my avatars after my favorite fictional characters, but nowadays I made my avatars my ideal version of me. Sure, I made tweaks to my appearance sometimes. I gave myself long blonde hair periodically. Or long black hair. Or soft, wavy light brown hair…

My ideal version of me, huh. Hmm.

Anyway! “Let’s go questing together!” I said.

“Thank you. I look forward to working with you.” Lucie-chan bowed to me, the picture of politeness.

Then, without further ado, the two of us set off on our adventure.

“Man, this is fun,” I said. I was impressed. I’d never played a primarily co-op game before, and I hadn’t known that it could be so much fun.

“It is,” said Lucie-chan. “I’ve never enjoyed a game more in my life.”

“Aww, come on,” I said. (Meanwhile, I was dying of happiness on the inside.) “You’re exaggerating.”

The combination of Lucie-chan’s words and her innocent smile cleansed the shadowy a-hole from my heart. Junior high Amaori Wraithnako’s spirit had moved on at last.

Except for the part of her that whispered, *“As fun as it is, you’re not always going to have friends ready and willing to play, you know? Whenever you go back to playing on your own, you’re going to think, ‘Man, that sure was fun…’ The unquenchable desire will have a stranglehold on you for life. You’d have been better off never knowing this happiness kek, Sucks to be you lolololol”*

Darn it! She was still here! Why did she always have to have the last word? Ohh, I was furious. Why? Because she was right! Still! I would keep striving for such glory! Because I’d promised myself I would!

“What’s the matter, Renako-sama?” Lucie-chan asked. “Why are you lying on the ground? Do you have a stomachache?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Nothing at all. I just think, it’s pretty lazy of these darn game companies. If they’re going to sell co-op games, how come they don’t include friends bundled into every copy?”

She looked completely baffled. Poor Lucie-chan was so innocent my question only served to flummox her. *Sorry, Lucie-chan,* I apologized mentally.

Just then—“Crap”—I made a mistake (I was still playing with trembling hands) and got bopped by a giant monster with a mallet. My HP dropped to zero, and I got kicked back to the death screen before I respawned at camp.

“Whoops,” I said. “Sorry.”

I took a glance over at Lucie-chan and discovered, to my horror, that she was sobbing.

“Huh?!” I yelped.

The tears rolled right down her cheeks and plopped onto her screen, refracting the image. She usually wasn’t all that expressive, but now her face was warped in sorrow. She glared at the monster that had killed me like her life depended on it.

“I’m so sorry,” she whimpered. “I couldn’t save you, Renako-sama.”

“N-nah, you’re good! It was my bad.”

“Renako-sama, you’re *dead*!”

“No, I’m alive! See? I’ve still got it in me!” I thwacked myself on the chest to prove it.

Lucie-chan didn’t look over. She kept sniffling, sobbing, and beating the crud out of that monster.

“L-look, you did it!” I said. “You killed it. Woo-hoo!”

“…Right.” Lucie-chan took a deep breath and let it out. “Okay.

Ready for the next quest?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure. You bounce back fast…"

What was with this girl? Maybe she was more than projecting into her character. Maybe she really *was* her character. At least, that was the impression she gave off.

"Uh, just out of curiosity…" I said. "Do you cry when you play shooters too?"

"Hm? Why would I?"

"You were literally crying just now…?"

Lucie-chan looked puzzled. Don't tell me she didn't notice her own tears!

"I feel sad when my allies are defeated," she said.

"Really? You, uh, do?"

"Yes. If I see anything that looks like a threat, I do my best to protect my teammates."

"Wow. But that must take a lot of jumping into danger yourself. Don't you ever end up dying right alongside them?"

"Oh yes. All the time."

Um. That one shut me up for a good second. No one played like that. Right? Like I knew I didn't have any other gamer friends, but still. People always treated their teammates like pawns of varying degrees of usefulness. Right? This wasn't just me being heartless, right?! I posed the question to my inner Satsuki-san. *Right?!* Her response? "Why are you asking me? You're a coward to seek out my opinion on the matter."

I was looking for a voice of agreement, not a critique on my character, but go off! Anyway, if Lucie-chan had made it to Platinum playing like *that*, she was a way better gamer than I was.

Now that I thought about it, I realized Lucie-chan had almost

never gotten hit. Even when she was soloing the mallet monster. What in the heck? Boy, I was really seeing all kinds of new sides to Lucie-chan today. The more I learned about her, the more mysterious she got.

She looked up and met my eyes. Her long eyelashes quivered as she smiled at me. “It’s fun that way,” she said.

Eep. My heart skipped a beat. Lucie-chan was ten billion percent *not* a replacement for my sister, but having a little sister like her—someone so honest, someone so sweet and cute—would’ve been really, really fun.

“If only I had someone like you,” she said.

“What?”

Lucie-chan looked down at the screen and said in a very, very quiet voice, “If only I had a family member like you who would always be there to play with me…I’m sure I’d be very, very happy.”

“…Oh.” I searched for words and didn’t find any.

“Mm-hmm,” she said. She blushed slightly and ducked her head.

Nah, I mean…I was a failure of a big sister. I couldn’t do anything for my little sib.

“Could I, uh, ask what makes you think that?” I said.

Lucie-chan looked up at my faltering question. She turned her enormous eyes on me, parted those soft lips, and said, “Because you came to my rescue. You’re so kind.”

“Me? Kind?” I tried my hardest to smile so I didn’t freeze up. “Th-thanks.”

I mean, maybe. But what else was I supposed to do? I was so friggin’ useless that the least I could do was be kind. Otherwise, no one would ever have deigned to keep my sorry ass company. And I wasn’t saying that to be pessimistic—those were just the facts. All my friends

and loved ones were super kind and loaded with amazing qualities on top of that. They could do sports, cheer people up, knock tests out of the park…

"Wait. Tests?" I said. The moment the word came out of my mouth, my body lurched to its feet of its own accord. "Shoot, my tests!"

"Hmm?" said Lucie-chan.

"I'm so sorry, but my finals are coming up. Lucie-chan, what time is it? Oh god, it's already dark! When did the sun go down?"

Step one: panic. Step two: uhhhhhhh.

"Oh! Right!" I said. "Here, let's exchange contact info. Then you can get in touch with me without waiting for me to pop up like a random encounter. Where's your phone?"

As I said that, I looked Lucie-chan up and down. The way she sat on the bench with her legs placed together was manners incarnate. And apart from the tote bag she brought the game consoles in, she didn't have a single thing on her.

"…You do have a phone, right?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Oh thank god."

I pulled a notebook out of my backpack, tore off a corner of a page, and wrote down my LINE address for her. Then, in case she wanted to text me, I added my phone number.

"Here," I said. "This is my contact info. Add me to your friends list later."

"Thank you very much." Lucie-chan took the paper with a bow, but I still had my doubts. Could she make it home and send me a friend request without messing it up?

"Make sure to take advantage of these modern conveniences," I

told her. “It’s like in an FPS. You always need to find a gun. You can’t just use your fists the whole time, you know?”

“Absolutely,” she said.

“Yup. Anyway, I gotta get going. Thanks for gaming with me! See you later.”

“Yes, see you later.”

I stood up, and just then. Lucie-chan. Hugged. Me.

“Wha—” I spluttered. Did this girl have no sense of danger or what? People could see and get the wrong idea about us! Not like I was getting wrong ideas—I bet Lucie-chan hugged just about anybody. But still! She smelled so good! Oh my god, pretty girls!!!

“Let’s play again someday, Renako-sama,” she breathed in my ear.

“U-uh-huh…” I warbled back.

And that was it. With one final wave, she turned and left. She looked so darling as she trotted off that I almost thought she was a princess in a fairy tale. Heck, if someone like her thought so highly of me, then maybe I had it in me to try a little bit harder.

First things first, though: studying for finals. *Hey, Satsuki-san! Are you free this Saturday?*

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“Satsuki-san, coming in clutch,” I cheered. “You’re the very best friend a girl could ever ask for. Say, guess what? I’ve been convinced of this for ages, but you’re *super* sweet. Well, hell. Even more than Ajisai-sa—okay, never mind. But, like, you’ve got Mai beat…well, actually, you know what? Scratch that; she’s pretty nice too. Okay, let’s say Kaho-chan. You’re way sweeter than Kaho-cha—hmm, no, she’s a sweetheart.

Um. Wow, everyone in the Quintet is so nice! Don't worry, Satsuki-san, you'll get 'em next time. Everyone's capable of character development!"

"Why am I being compared to *her*?" Satsuki-san muttered, almost to herself.

"Hm? What was that?"

"Nothing."

It didn't sound like nothing, not when she looked spitting mad. Freaky.

Today was Saturday, and I was spending it at Satsuki-san's house. I showed up on her doorstep bawling for her to tutor me for finals, and she acted like I was being an enormous pain. But she crumbled when I said, "Why would you ever refuse helping someone with such an earnest desire to learn?" In the end, she didn't have work that day, so she gave me the okay. That was a close one, but I made it. As much as Satsuki-san seemed annoyed at me, I made it.

Now she sat in her room in casual clothes, her hair done up in a fat braid that dangled from her shoulder and swished back and forth like a stand of pampas grass. There was something gentle, something familial about her today. I wished she'd wear that hairstyle at school too. A girl's hairstyle can change her whole image, you know? Of course, she was drop-dead gorgeous with her hair down too. Man, both hairstyles were too good to give up.

Anyway.

"It's not much," I said, "but I got you a little something as thanks for all the help."

"What's this?" she said. "A bribe?"

"You know what? Sure, why not."

I took out a baumkuchen I'd bought at the bakery in front of the

station with my own hard-earned allowance. She accepted the gift, but her facial expression was anything but grateful. It was less “accepting a gift” and more “the pact is sealed.” So I guess it worked.

She put her elbows down on the low tea table, propped her chin on top of her fists, and looked up at me with an expression of boredom.

“You’re going to quite the effort to win my help this time around,” she said. “Couldn’t manage it on your own, hm?”

“Uh, sorta. But not really.”

I put down my overloaded backpack—it was stuffed with textbooks—and gave her a lame grin. Rubbing my hands together, I explained, “Remember the finals before summer vacation? I got such good grades my parents gave me extra allowance. So. Yeah.”

“My, my.”

“I’m just thinking, if I score high again, I might get myself a little more cash. Which would be great. See, I bought some, like, IRL clothes the other day. And I still want to get some new characters, weapons, and skins…” I giggled weakly.

“And how, pray tell, does this concern me?” Satsuki-san’s face moved from Done to Overdone. Oops. Guess I was too honest.

“Th-that’s not all!” I rushed to add. “Studying’s important! And I thought I should work harder on it. And. You know! It’ll help me in the future! And it’s the hot new thing, right? New viral trend: studying!”

I grew louder as I barreled on and wound up just about screaming by the end.

Satsuki-san facepalmed. “Fine, I get it,” she sighed. “I always knew you were like this. You’re the sort to put your desires first and force your beloved, beautiful wife to pick up your slack. You’ll never change.”

“What the heck does that mean?!” I demanded.

“You poor thing. The devil herself has stolen all the precious light of existence from your life. There are seven virtues—sincerity, honesty, purity, diligence, temperance, morality, and sublimity—which shall never be yours again. But you have no choice. You must live on with the weight of your sin.”

“I still have all seven, thank you very much!” I smacked my chest —allegedly the home of such qualities—to prove it. The audacity! I’d never been so insulted in my life.

Satsuki-san ignored my protests and opened the textbook. “All right, enough of your little jokes. Let’s get down to business. Finals are next week, so we need to start drilling on these topics.”

“Oh, right. Thank you.”

I still had a bone or two to pick, but I was in no place to call her out. I couldn’t afford to tick off Satsuki-san and lose everything, so I nodded obediently. But just then, I saw something that gave me the shock of my life. “Wait a minute! Isn’t this a junior high textbook?”

“Yes, and?” She knitted together a pair of unamused eyebrows as I quivered in righteous indignation. “I picked it up just in case. For review, as I’m teaching your sister. Is there a problem with that?”

“N-no!” I shook my head. “Gosh darn it, Little Sis. Not only are you getting Satsuki-san to tutor you, but now you’re intruding on her personal time! The cheek!”

“Don’t worry,” Satsuki-san said. “If we’re talking cheek, you still take the cake.”

“Yeah, but I’m different. We’re the very bestest friends in the whole wide world, remember? But my little sister’s just a remora leeching off your favor. Why, I oughta challenge her to an FPS match and shoot ’er dead!”

“If you aren’t going to study, would you please go home?”

“Sorry! I’ll shut up.”

I bowed deeply to her, and she sighed in exasperation before opening our high school math textbook. “Fine. You get started on your part, and I’ll be right here working on my own things. Tell me if there’s anywhere you get stuck.”

“Thanks! I really appreciate it.”

And then she set about unknotting the tangled mess that was my brain.

I starfished on the floor and sighed. Oh god, brainwork.

“Good job,” Satsuki-san said. “You did it, much to my surprise.”

Yup, she taught me the methods, and I solved a buttload of problems under her tutelage. We were at it for three hours without a break. No wonder I was pooped.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “If I didn’t pull it off, then I’d be nothing but a shameless hussy gatecrashing on your doorstep.”

“Well, you were. Academic achievement or no. But I suppose a hussy who works hard is better than a hussy who doesn’t… Emphasis on the ‘suppose.’”

“You know, I’d work harder if you dropped the ‘hussy’ part.”

“A shame,” she said. “Let’s take a break.”

She ignored me and stretched out flat on her back next to me. Seeing her looong body get looooonger made me think, *Wow, she sure is jaw-droppingly beautiful*. Some people in my position might have gotten a little hot under the collar at the sight. (Who, me? I would never.)

Then Satsuki-san got up and made quick work of cutting the baumkuchen. I had my own water bottle, so I politely declined any further beverages. She made herself a cup of instant coffee, and then we

had ourselves a picture-perfect snack break.

"Here, have some cake," she said. "Get some sugar in you."

"Thanks. Wow, it's good."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?"

I sat up so I could chow down on my cake. Wow, Satsuki-san openly liked it. She said something nice about the gift I brought her… Oddly, I felt a spark of happiness in me. You know what? It wasn't half-bad to bring gifts for people.

With a happy sigh, I said, "I could really go for some sort of brain-dead activity right about now."

"Brain-dead? I have just the thing." Satsuki-san put a hand to her mouth and simpered, "Oooh, Amaori, what's your blood type? For, like, fortune-telling? Y'know?"

Wait. Simpered? Who was this friendly stranger, and what had she done with Satsuki-san?

For a moment, I was too stunned to speak. Then I went, "Huh?!"

"C'mon, tell me. What is it? Huh? Huh?"

She never let up on the attack. Oh god, what was this? A horror movie?

"I-I'm type O, but I'm not sure why you're asking," I said.

"Ooh. That's so cool."

"And you are…?"

"Aww, can't you guess?" she pouted.

"Um. You seem pretty type A," I said.

"Got it in one!"

"Go me. Wait, Satsuki-san. You never talk like this!"

Satsuki-san knocked it off. "What?" she said. "You asked for brain-

dead."

"As if a sudden personality switch doesn't take brainpower?!"

Satsuki-san tucked her hair behind her ear and smirked, as if a little thing like this was child's play for her. God, what *was* that just now? She girl-talked like a pro.

"I bet you could talk to just about anyone, huh," I said.

She gave me a long, hard look before nodding. "I suppose."

What was that supposed to mean?

Just then, I noticed something weird—that is, a weird object in the room.

"Hey," I said, "that's one of those last gen handheld consoles, right? Why do you guys have one?"

Come to think of it, Satsuki-san said, way back when, that her mom played shooter games. Was her mom a gamer?

Satsuki-san hesitated for a second before saying, "I'm borrowing it from Kaho."

"Say what?" Talk about the surprise of the century. Not the Kaho-chan having a portable game console thing—I could picture that in a heartbeat—but Satsuki-san borrowing it from Kaho-chan.

"After my last foray into video games, she suggested I try this sort," she explained.

"Huh. Can I check it out?"

"Uh. Sure, be my guest…?"

What was that pause for? Still, she said yes. So surely she wouldn't start kicking me or thwacking me with the corner of a book.

I picked up the game and came back to sit next to Satsuki-san. I then turned it on, only to find yet another surprise:

“Say what? You’re playing a dating sim?”

And like, one made for guys. A dating sim where you romanced girls!

“Sure, dating sims are fun,” I said, “and there’s a bunch of cult classics with longtime fans. But why would Kaho-chan recommend one to you?”

Satsuki-san hugged her knees and feigned ignorance. “‘Fun,’” she repeated. “What, have you played dating sims yourself?”

“Hm? Yeah, just casually. And like in junior high.”

“Oh ho? Dating sims where you pursued female characters?”

Satsuki-san averted her eyes from me, and for some weird reason, I started to feel awkward. Hey, wait a minute.

“Hold on!” I said. “You’ve got the wrong idea. I didn’t, like, have a waifu or anything! I just enjoyed them for the gameplay. That’s all.”

“I don’t care about your sexuality,” she said. “You don’t need to keep hiding it.”

“I’m not!”

Had I not told her over and over and over and over *and over* that I wasn’t into girls?! Could someone *please* believe me already?

“Besides, you’re the one playing this!” I snapped back. “What about you, huh? Are you into girls? Huh?!”

“Perhaps I am.”

“…What.”

I thought that was going to be the comeback of the century, but she just agreed with me. And that threw me. For. A. Loop. Satsuki-san was into girls?

“My father has never been in the picture,” she said, “so I have no

close relationships with men. Perhaps that is to blame. My mother has likewise filled my head with her warnings about men."

"I'm scared to ask, but what warnings?"

Satsuki-san adopted the same expression she wore when the teacher called on her in class. "That I must stay vigilant. For I have always been a beauty, even as a child."

"Ah. Okay, that makes sense."

I hadn't known that Satsuki-san never knew her dad. Now that she said that, everything kinda clicked—you know, like why her mom had a Taser. The hyper-preparedness. Or why they lived alone. No doubt, Satsuki-san's mom had drilled it all into her from the toddler stage.

"Not to say that you can't be assaulted by a woman," Satsuki-san added. "As you can attest to."

"Yeah! It happens!"

Moving on from the Mai thing, Satsuki-san put a hand on her cheek. "Looking back on it, I suppose it's been mainly women who have showed me any kindness. My mother's colleagues often looked out for me and such."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Besides, girls are just easier to talk to in general. And they're nice and cute and pretty and sweet. And they smell better than guys! They just. Girls, man. They rock. So yeah, I get what you mean."

There was a bafflingly long silence. Huh? Wait, look—this didn't mean I was into girls myself!

Satsuki-san finally said, "I was not going to go that far, but I suppose you're right. At any rate, it must all depend on the environment you grow up in and the sort of people you meet."

"For sure."

“Yes, but be that as it may…” Satsuki-san smirked. “I don’t like anyone in a romantic sense, so me ‘liking girls’ is entirely theoretical.”

Wait, didn’t that contradict everything she’d just said?

“Fine!” I snapped. “Here, play your game. I’ll watch.”

“If you insist. I haven’t started it yet, just so you’re aware.”

She pressed Play, and I scooted closer to watch. Oof. We were awfully close now. N-not that my mind wandered in any untoward directions. I wasn’t into girls, as we all knew. Oh, but who were we kidding? I was nothing but a mess of excuses. Look, it was just because she was so pretty *and* my ex-girlfriend to boot!

“Oh, hold on,” I said. “You have to name your MC after yourself whenever you play dating sims. It’s just one of those things everyone does.”

“Is it really?”

“Yeah, duh. It increases the immersion factor and makes the game more fun.”

“Hmm. Much like a second-person story, I would assume.”

I didn’t know what the heck that was, but I said, “Yup!”

Thus, Koto Satsuki made her video game debut…sorta. Because when the game said, “I’m Koto Satsuki, your average high school boy. And before the end of my three years at my new co-ed school, I’m going to get a cute girlfriend!” Satsuki-san groaned.

“Good God almighty. What on earth is this atrocity?” she said.

“What on earth is what atrocity?”

“Look at my stats. Smarts, Fitness, Looks—all zeroes! How did this boy manage to make it into high school? What has he been doing with his whole life? Nothing but breathing?”

“No, that’s just how these games work,” I explained. “You can

raise your stats. You can even get first in the class by the time finals roll around."

"And what is my class rank now?"

"With Smarts of 0? Uh, you're probably closer to the end of the list. You're the kind of guy who'd get held back…"

Satsuki-san promptly closed the game and returned to the title screen.

"Hello?" I said.

"I cannot possibly see myself in such an uneducated churl," she said. "Let's start over from the top."

"Excuse me?! Why did you just name him Amaori Renako? You are so mean!"

"There, now it's perfect."

"It's really not!"

Average high school boy Amaori Renako gave us a dumb grin and pumped his fist in the air. Time to get a cute girlfriend! *Homie, a girl should be the last thing on your mind,* I told him. *You need to get those grades up!*

"Now we can only hope," Satsuki-san said, "that *someone* in this fictional universe will find you attractive."

"Satsuki-san, that's literally the point of the game."

Oh yeah, I should probably explain how this game worked. First off, it was a stat builder. Once you got your stats high enough, a new girl showed up. From there, you had to work on increasing her affection for you by taking her on dates. Rinse and repeat. Your goal was for the girl to announce her feelings for you at the end of the game.

"If the two of you are that close," Satsuki-san said, "couldn't you simply confess to her? Why bother waiting for her to speak up?"

“I mean, that’s just how these games work.”

“Interesting. You’d think one would make the first move if they wanted to date a girl. I suppose Amaori Renako is too afraid of commitment.”

“Stop calling the MC Amaori Renako!”

Before long, the MC’s childhood friend showed up. She wore a headband in her long hair.

“There she is,” I breathed. “Michino Tebiki-san!”

“Pardon?”

“Oh, nothing. Just, this girl—Tebiki-san—she’s the hardest character in the game. You basically have to max out all your stats to pursue her. People call her the game’s final boss. She wouldn’t be my go-to, honestly. Since she’s the top of the school’s social elite and all.”

“But isn’t she your childhood friend?”

A cutscene started playing: us running into Tebiki-san on our way home from school. Amaori Renako asked her, “Wanna walk home together?” but Tebiki-san turned him down in no time flat.

Satsuki-san frowned. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are, but like…she doesn’t give us the time of day unless we have high enough Smarts. She’s kinda mean, honestly.”

“Ah, I see. She has no interest in spending time with morons purely because she’s known them since childhood. A woman after my own heart.”

“Wow, did you just find your waifu?”

Meanwhile, Amaori Renako chuckled like the dim bulb he was and said, “I guess she just didn’t feel like it. Oh well. I’ll get her next time!” *Homie, it’s because you’re two bricks shy of a load*. This Amaori Renako dude sucked.

We unlocked a number of other girls too, but Satsuki-san never took her eyes off the prize: forcing our Smarts up. She kept spamming the Study command, and when June hit, our Stress overtopped our Stamina, making us fall ill. Okay, now that was in character for Amaori Renako.

“What just happened?” Satsuki-san asked.

“You need to Rest periodically, or you’ll burn out.”

“What, can’t he rest while he’s studying? Surely he isn’t studying for hours on end without breaks. That would be ridiculous.”

“I agree, but that’s not how the game works!”

She and I were in agreement: this Amaori Renako character couldn’t take care of himself. He was really starting to get on my nerves. Even though he had so many wonderful friends to fall back on, he still ran away up to the roof, and—wait. No, that was the real Amaori Renako.

“And why does he sleep the entire day when I make him Rest?” Satsuki-san said. “It’s not like anyone expects him to go home from school and study for six hours straight. But he should still make an effort to study every day. It wouldn’t hurt to put in an hour of studying.”

“But he can’t. That’s just not how Amaori Renako rolls. He can only do one thing once he sets his mind to it, and that’s why he’s always causing problems for everyone else.”

“I see.”

However, thanks to our hard work, he managed to place within the top thirty students in class when the pre-summer vacation finals rolled around. My heart sang.

“Amaori Renako!” I cried. “You did it!”

“I suppose that will have to do for a start,” Satsuki-san said. “After

all, Amaori Renako *did* work hard."

I giggled bashfully.

"Now if only you"—that was, the real Amaori Renako—"could score just as high," Satsuki-san continued.

Eep. Had I just lost? To the Amaori Renako who still, months into the game, had zero Fitness and Looks? I lost to *that*? No, say it wasn't so! I didn't want to be a loser!

"Very well," Satsuki-san said. "Since he did such a good job, we shall allow him a little fun. Who should we ask out?"

"As in, one of the girls? You should choose whichever one's your type. That's the fun of dating sims."

"I hardly think I have a type, but very well." Satsuki-san scrutinized the list of girls whose phone numbers we had. Then, after a moment to think about it, she called up the girl on the student council. She seemed like a sweetheart.

"Ooh," I said. "Why'd you pick her? Just asking."

"I was on the fence about Tebiki-san."

"Gotcha. You're so talented yourself, you like the smart, strait-laced type."

"No. I merely thought that if I were Tebiki-san, I'd turn down any boy so utterly incompetent in anything but book smarts. So what was the point in calling her?"

"That's mean," I told her.

"And then," Satsuki-san went on, "we must consider that Amaori Renako is too horribly incompetent for small talk. Thus, I chose the one girl who seemed to be the most put together to compensate for him."

"That's really mean!"

If she'd been a streamer, the chat would have been popping off

right about now.

While she and I bickered, Satsuki-san made Amaori Renako go on several dates with this same girl all through summer vacation. At first, Satsuki-san kept griping about this or that as she played, but as time went on, she seemed to warm up to chatting with this fictional girl. Oh *ho.*

"You like quiet girls like her, huh?" I said. "I never would have guessed."

"Not really," she said.

That's when it hit me. "Wait. No, I totally should have guessed. This girl's the spitting image of Ajisai-san! Now it all makes sense."

Satsuki-san was soft on Ajisai-san. If I put sugar into a rice ball instead of salt, Satsuki-san would have taken one bite, thrown it the floor, and trampled it into the dirt. But if she got a sugared rice ball from Ajisai-san, she'd smile, chow down, and proclaim it the best thing since sliced bread. That's how much Satsuki-san adored her. It only made sense she would choose Ajisai-san's video game clone.

"You're wrong," Satsuki-san said. "They're nothing alike."

"No, but just look at her! It's the way she talks. Her whole vibe!"

"What, do you think Sena is the only girl who talks like that? Sena's most Sena-ish aspect is her heart. Her ability to reach out to every sorry soul out there. Please don't compare me to the likes of you, not when you go leaping after every pretty girl you catch sight of."

"Um, the game's barely started? You have no idea how much heart this girl has. But you still picked her! Because she's like Ajisai-san!"

"Goodness gracious, you say the most out of pocket things. But never mind about that. Let's take Sena on an aquarium date."

"You literally just called her Sena!"

She glared at me for screaming in her ear. “Shut up.” Why bully me? I was right!

Finally, having had her fun of horsing around all summer vacation long, Satsuki-san saved the game and put the game down.

“Break time’s over,” she said. “Time for the real Amaori Renako to Study.”

“Better watch out for my Stamina and Stress meters,” I said, giving her the very cutest, most pleadingest face I could.

And yet for all my efforts, she just told me, “Shut up.”

Bruh. Did this mean I had zero Looks irl too?

Okay, so kinda off topic here, but from that day on, Satsuki-san started messaging me about the game. “What is this?” messages, or “I made it to XYZ” messages. You know, happy progress updates. Except she’d write them like this:

Amaori Renako finally came first in class.

Amaori Renako placed dead last in the sports festival. Work out more.

I take it there are some nasty rumors spreading among Amaori Renako’s flock of girls. Thought you ought to know.

That was just how the game worked, though! Satsuki-san was clearly getting a kick out of giving me heart attacks. That friggin’ girl. She was a trickster, I tell you.

But whatever. One day, when we were taking a break from studying, I sat back down across from her and opened my big fat mouth without thinking. “Why the sudden interest in dating sims anyway?”

“I beg your pardon?” she said.

“Like, I thought you weren’t into romance. You literally once called it stupid.”

“Well…” Satsuki-san looked away. It was a very OOC response for her, considering how confident she normally was. Why was she playing coy? “It has to do with Mai.”

“With Mai?” I repeated. “What’d she do now?”

Satsuki-san closed her eyes. “I assume she’ll come beg me for romantic advice about you before too long, so I thought it best I brush up on my concept of puppy love.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” Things were clicking. “And your mom said you’ve been reading romance novels nonstop lately, huh? I guess that’s part of it too.”

“Indeed.” Then, for some very odd reason, Satsuki-san glared at me through half-lidded eyes. “And? Got a problem with it?”

“Huh?” What was she so aggro for? “Uh, no? I was just thinking, that’s nice of you.”

“Me, nice? Nonsense. I’ve never been nice in my life.”

“You tried to help my sister out. And, like, you’re playing a game to help Mai…”

Satsuki-san struggled to come up with an answer for that. Finally, she spat, “Hush. Keep your comments to yourself.”

“S-sorry,” I stammered back.

We lapsed into silence for a moment. Oof. It was kind of awkward. Maybe I put my foot in my mouth with that one. Maybe I owed her a more sincere apology.

But before I could say anything, Satsuki-san went, “Amaori?”

“Y-yeah?”

She leered at me. “Is it fun? Your, ah. Your real-life version of this

‘dating’ thing.”

“Um. Well. I think so.”

“I personally am not interested in dating,” she said. “Close friends are all I need, as clichéd as it is.”

“Well, I get that. Like even now, I kinda feel the same way.” But, also, like… *Man, how do I say this?* I looked down at my hands and mumbled, “But I mean…in the end, they’re both just relationships.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you know. People have been caring about each other in some way or another since the dawn of time, right? And I don’t just mean guys for girls and vice versa. Like, girls care for each other too.”

Satsuki-san sat with that for a sec before she said, “Go on.”

Well, okay.

“And I guess people put a label on it later, right? Someone tells you, ‘Hey, I want to go out with you,’ so you promise that you’re going to love this person forever. Using that ‘lover’ label. But like, at the heart of it all, that label’s grounded in the simple desire to care for the other person. You know?”

And that all meant…

“See, I just want Mai and Ajisai-san to be happy. If they both want me in a certain way, then I want to try and give them what they want. But like…it doesn’t make a big difference to me what we call it. Like we could be friends, or lovers, or family—it’s whatever. In the end, it’s just…a relationship. Do you get what I’m saying?”

I looked at Satsuki-san to see how she was taking it. Her eyes were cold as she looked back at me.

“Last time I checked,” she said, “friends don’t kiss or get butterflies in their stomach around each other.”

She was all but saying, “These are *clearly* different things.” But I disagreed.

“…I dunno about that,” I said.

“Pardon?”

“Oh, never mind!” I thought she’d get mad at me if I told her, so I bit back what I was about to say.

“No, tell me. I’ll be mad if you don’t.”

“Seriously, how the heck are you reading my mind, and can you stop?!”

“Never you mind about that. Just tell me.”

“Eep.” I laced my fingers together over my chest and very hesitantly confessed, “I just… My heart beat a mile a minute when you kissed me and when we bathed together. So I just think…maybe you *can* have that kind of thing as friends. Like, if you respect someone, and really admire someone…maybe you *can* still get butterflies in your stomach.”

“…Excuse me?”

And Satsuki-san. Well.

She turned just as red as the night she kissed me for the first time. “You—” she spluttered.

“Wait, no! Sorry! That came out wrong.”

“Are you telling me…you have *feelings* for me?”

“Huh?!” I cried. I waved my hands in a frantic effort to refute her. “No, not at all. I think! Like, of course I have feelings about you—but not in that sense. I promise! Besides, I already have a girlfr—multiple girlfriends.”

Satsuki-san put a hand to her mouth and looked at a spot on the floor. She looked like she was thinking it over. However, I could still see

her ears where her hair didn't cover them, and they were bright red. That, in turn, made me feel embarrassed.

“Let’s stop talking about this,” I said. “This is too sensitive a topic to have with an ex.”

But Satsuki-san had to have the last word. “If we were to approach this from the opposite perspective, are you saying that uncertain feelings don’t become romantic love until the moment you define it as such?”

What a difficult question. “Sorry?” I said. “You good, Satsuki-san?”

She looked up and shook her head. “Never mind. Thank you. I learned quite a bit just now.”

“Uh? You’re…welcome?”

If nothing else, I no longer felt like Satsuki-san was so hard to approach. I couldn’t have told you why, but it seemed like she got an answer for her question after all.

Anyway, it was high time for us to get back to work—but just then, my phone rang.

“Eep! Sorry, let me get that,” I said.

“Why did you apologize? It’s none of my business,” said Satsuki-san.

I grabbed my phone and saw from the notif that it was Kaho-chan. Unlike when I was home alone, I wasn’t in my “Shut out the world! Avoid all human interactions!” mode, so I picked up immediately.

But before I could get out a “Hello,” Kaho-chan’s cutesy voice bombarded my eardrums.

“Heya, Rena-chin! You free tomorrow?” she belted out.

She was clearly in a hurry, so I nodded frantically. “Yeah, I guess. I want to do so some studying, but that doesn’t take all day.”

And then, like a firecracker going off, she declared, “Great! Also, Serara finally got back to me.”

“Wait, are you serious?”

“Yup yup. So I made plans for us to meet. That’s why I was callin’ to see if you’re free.”

Aha. Kaho-chan was tireless in her efforts to contact Seira-san. A bit late in the game, as the thing with my sister had kinda reached its conclusion, but whatever. If Seira-san was willing to talk, I was all ears!

“Oh my god,” I said. “Thank you, Kaho-chan!”

“Just so y’know, there’s kinda like a… Hmm, how do I put this…”

“Put what?”

Kaho-chan searched for the right words for a couple of moments, and then her voice dropped. “I guess Serara had a good reason to give us the runaround, y’know? Oh well! You’ll get the deets once we see her.”

“Wait, what? Now I’m curious!”

“See ya later, paligator!”

And she hung up. I figured she would tell me where to go and when to meet her later.

Okay, but why had Seira-san come around after all this time? And what could she possibly have to say?

I stared down at my phone for a few more seconds before Satsuki-san asked, “Is it about your sister?”

“Oh. Yeah. Kaho-chan got in touch with one of her friends.”

“Good. Let us hope this brings about a change for the better.”

“Um. Yeah, I hope so.”

I had best batten down the hatches to weather whatever ominous thing Kaho-chan was alluding to. Besides, no matter what it was, I would find out tomorrow. But *gaaaaahd* was I dying of curiosity! Tomorrow was a good twelve plus hours away! Days were long!

I was going through it for real. Satsuki-san sighed at me like she

was so done with my BS. “You can’t focus like this, I’m sure. Should we call it a day here?”

“No, I can do it,” I protested. “Besides, if I didn’t study at all, I wouldn’t be fit to be your very bestest friend in the whole wide world.”

“And receive that allowance, no doubt.”

I giggled and rubbed the spot under my lip in an ain’t-I-a-stinker gesture. “You got me there. Boy, you really know me too well.”

Satsuki-san frowned, again. “…Remind me what I did to deserve getting saddled with you?”

Excuse me?! What was that for?

***

When I arrived at the train station to meet Kaho-chan, I found her decked out in her street fashion best, complete with a baseball cap as the cherry on top. Honestly, I envied the heck out of girls who could pull this look off. You had to be darn cute to do it.

“So, where are we going?” I asked her. “Are we meeting her at a diner or something?”

“You know it, bestie. There’s a super cute place in Shibuya!”

“Shibuya?! Why on earth would we ever go somewhere so…uh, far?”

I was about to say, “Why on earth would we ever go somewhere so horribly toxic to us introverts?” before I switched gears and made it a problem of distance. Distance was always an issue. Had Ashigaya been just a little farther away, I might’ve stopped going to school for a whole different reason.

As we got on the train and felt it rumble under us as it pulled

away from the station, Kaho-chan raised a triumphant finger and cackled. “It helps sell our story.”

“Our what now?”

“I had to pull out all the stops to get you this meeting with Serara. Am I awesome or what?”

“Huh? Uh…yes?”

“You don’t sound like you mean it.”

“You can’t expect someone to give sincere compliments at the drop of a hat!”

A slight shiver traveled down my spine at the chill in Kaho-chan’s voice. The sheer dichotomy between her sternness and her usual peppiness made it all the worse when she told me off.

I schooled my face into a serious expression and said, “You need to be nice to me, Kaho-chan. Those are the rules, right?”

“Since, like, when?”

“Satsuki-san’s the bad cop, so you, Mai, Ajisai-san, and the rest of the human race need to be the good cop. Got it?”

“That’s a whole lotta good cops… Whatever. Moving on from that all-too-Rena-chin-centric image of the world.” Kaho-chan stopped on a dime and shot me a look. What was that for?

“I gotta get this out of the way,” she continued. “See, I’m in the camp of people who say it’s no biggie to cut class.”

“You and Satsuki-san both,” I said. It came as no surprise to hear that from Kaho-chan.

“Just ’cause everyone’s different, you know? Like if going to school cuts into the time you could be using to chase your dreams, who gives a hoot about school?”

I tilted my head, giving it some thought. I didn’t think that was my

sister's issue.

"I have a lot of cosplay oomfs, see," she said. "Some of 'em don't finish high school so they can start working early. And then there's streamers and stuff. Plus people who get their Certs." Certs being short for Certificate for Students Achieving the Proficiency Level of Upper Secondary School Graduates. It's basically a Japanese GED. "But if you go that route, you gotta make sure your family's on the same page. Eighth graders are basically kids, y'know? They're not independent yet. You can't decide your whole future on your own at that age."

Now that she mentioned it, I recalled her saying she had to bring her grades up to get permission to keep cosplaying. Her folks let her shell out a lot of her own cash to pay for the photography shoots and whatnot, but in spite of that (or maybe because of that), she did things by the book when it came to her family.

"But that's why I think your sis should go back to school," Kaho-chan said, her finger surging upward once more. "Yeah, I know she's heard it a million times, but it's true. School's not worthless. And if whatever stopped her from going's so big she can't handle it on her own, I wanna help however I can." She flushed and looked away from me. "Just 'cause I'm so nice. You know me, I'd stick my nose in anybody's business if it could help 'em. Plus, me 'n your sis are buddies now after that basketball thing. And she and Serara are tight. I thought I'd be pushin' it if I came to talk to her directly, but I figured I could help out on the sidelines. Y'know?"

"Y-yeah, I do. Thank you, really!"

It was a beautiful sentiment, and one surprisingly well thought-out. Very mature. And so cool. Honestly, I stanned. Kaho-chan for prime minister.

"'Kay, so now you know where I'm at," she said, digging out her

phone to show it to me. “And Serara’s been ghosting me for ages now.”

“H-huh? Why’s that?” I asked.

“Prolly sensed some bad vibes. I made seventeen alts to talk to her, but she ignored me on all of them.”

“No, that’s on you. Literally who does that?” If Kaho-chan tried spamming me with texts from seventeen different accounts and I didn’t know what was going on, I would’ve run for my life. “But in spite of that, she finally got back to you?”

“Nah.” Kaho-chan gave her head a cute little shake. Excuse me? Was this some kind of joke?

“But I thought we made plans…?”

“Through Mai-Mai.”

“Oh. That makes sense. So we’re meeting up with Mai?”

“Nope.” She shook her head again. She looked like she was enjoying messing with me.

“Stop it, Kaho-chan!” I said. “You’re supposed to be the good cop!”

“I love how you say that, like it’s an actual thing.”

Then she whispered something I couldn’t comprehend. What was she saying? I thought we were *“emotionally unstable, abusive boyfriend Rena-chin and the girl who will never, ever stop loving her no matter how much Rena-chin beats her, so please, please don’t leave her…”*

Kaho-chan stuck her tongue out at me (so cute!) and grinned. “I borrowed Mai-Mai’s account.”

“Say what?”

“Serara took the bait hook, line, and sinker.”

“Uh, I don’t know how to feel about this one, chief…”

I flashed back to the time I met Seira-san. She was so obsessed

with Mai that she insisted we swap contact info. Well, if she was a big Mai fan…I guess we could use that to our advantage? But this was definitely against the rules. The little sister figure of Ashigaya High was a fiend!

"How else were we gonna get her to talk?" Kaho-chan said. "And it's to help your sis. Justice is on our side. Right? Right, Rena-chin? Yoo-hoo, Commander Rena-chin!"

"Why am I suddenly the mastermind of this operation?"

Not gonna lie, this did not sit right with me.

"K-Kaho-chan," I said. "Should I grab a rock? For, uh, self-defense?"

"Good idea, Commander Rena-chin! Let's arm up."

"Would you cool it with the commander thing?!"

I felt like I was dying. Kaho-chan could sport a disarmingly charming grin while committing atrocities. She was the kind of girl I'd never want to have as an enemy—and I meant that in a whole different way than with Satsuki-san.

While we waited at a far back table at the café in Shibuya, the door behind us opened with a clang of the bell. In waltzed Seira-san, wearing a brand new autumn outfit that fit her to a T. She was dressed to the nines. As if her normal prettiness wasn't bad enough, she had enough glitz and glamour to boost her looks a good 50 percent.

"Yoo-hoo!" she called into the shop. "Thank you so, so much for waiting." She tittered. "You're the best, Oduka Mai-san!"

Then, when she saw me sitting there, she froze.

"Uh, hey," I said. I bowed in greeting.

Seira-san blinked maybe half a dozen times. "Huh? Oneesan-

senpai? What are you doing he—”

And then she saw the person behind me and turned rigid. Seira-san squeaked, but it was too late, as Kaho-chan shoved her into the booth, sat down next to her—blocking her escape route—and whisked off her hat.

“What’s poppin’, Serara?” Kaho-chan snapped her a peace sign.

I could see the gears turning in Seira-san’s head as she realized what was going on. For a couple of seconds, she said nothing at all. Her face was frozen in a look Picasso could have painted.

And then. She took in a huge breath of air. And…bawled her eyes out.

Oh. My. God.

Still sniffling and snuffling, Seira-san moaned, “C-curse you, Nagipo!”

“Whoopsies,” said Kaho-chan. “I didn’t think this would make you cry so hard.”

“I’m not crying!” Seira-san insisted, crying.

A half-eaten plate of pancakes sat on the table in front of her, courtesy of me ’n Kaho-chan’s wallets. I was glad to find that even Kaho-chan had a sense of shame for making an eighth-grade girl sob her head off. I couldn’t have stayed her friend otherwise.

“Aww, poor widdwe Sewawa-chan,” Kaho-chan teased. “Whatevew you say. You’re not cwwying, are you? Big girls like Sewawa-chan don’t cwy, do they?”

“I want to go home! Let me out of the booth!”

“Shh, shh, don’t be wike that. Let’s get Sewawa-chan anothew dwink. What sounds yummy? Your oneechans wiww pay for whatevew

you want."

Seira-san moaned, clearly torn. "Fine… I guess I'll take a melon soda float." Her eyes were turning red as she snorfed up the last of her snot.

"I'm really sorry, Seira-san," I said, "for extending the invitation like this." My crushing guilt pushed me down into another bow.

"You don't need to apologize," she said. "It wasn't like I was happy about seeing Oduka Mai-san or anything!"

She whipped her head away before her gaze dropped to her lap. "It's not like, when *the* Oduka Mai-san said she wanted to meet me… because I caught her attention at the cosplay summit, and now she just wanted to talk…I definitely didn't spend days thinking about it or get so worked up last night I couldn't sleep. I swear."

"I'm so, so sorry."

With every word, Seira-san's frown drooped lower and lower. I bowed so deep my forehead just about hit the tabletop. Kaho-chan, on the other hand, grinned. I was beginning to question whether Kaho-chan had any empathy at all.

"I can try to set the two of you up later…?" I offered.

"What do you mean?" Seira-san glared at me like I was her archnemesis. Eep.

"I mean, the next time Mai gets a break from work, I can text you…? And, like, you guys can make real plans to hang out and… stuff…"

Seira-san fell silent. But even as she glared like her life depended on it, I could see the tiniest fraction of that animosity draining from her eyes. With pursed lips and a lidded stare, she demanded, "Gimme a date."

“Uh, it depends on Mai’s schedule.”

“You’re just trying to backstab me again, aren’t you?”

“No, I swear! And what do you mean ‘again?!’”

“You’ll trick and toy with and use this poor, innocent teenage girl until she’s chewed up and spat out. You’ll take everything from me and then leave me to die. Like a dirty old rag…like a dirty old rag!”

Her voice rose to a feverish pitch so loud everyone in the shop could hear it. Everyone turned to look at us.

I flushed bright red and flapped my hands in frantic denial. “D-don’t worry! Look, I’ll text Mai right now. Then you can trust me, right?”

“I bet that account’s fake. I bet you made an alt with the name of Oduka Mai just so you could trick me.”

“What, like I’m a con artist?!”

“Rena-chin *does* have a track record,” Kaho-chan unhelpfully supplied.

“Excuse me, madam!” I snapped back at her. “Quit sipping your iced milk on the sidelines and get in here! This is all your fault.”

Thanks to Kaho-chan, this poor, innocent teenage girl now had zero trust in me. Even after the whole sister thing got cleared up, my relationship with Seira-san would be ruined!

“See?! Look!” I said. “I’m sending a message to Mai right now.”

And I dashed off a text to Mai in two seconds flat: *One of my sister’s friends is a fan of yours. Would you be willing to meet her sometime?*

I brandished my phone at Seira-san, and she scrutinized the message with narrowed eyes.

“You sent it, I’ll give you that,” she finally conceded. “But that could just be for me to see. You could always erase the message before

whoever's on the other end has a chance to look at it."

"Oh, for the love of—how am I supposed to prove this to you?"

Seira-san held up her phone. "I want video evidence."

"Huh?"

"I want your statement on video. Right here, right now. Do you have your school ID on you?"

"I do, but what for?"

She ignored that question. "I'm going to send you a statement. Face the camera and read it aloud."

Seira-san sent me a text file. I held my student ID over my chest, looked straight into the camera, and forced myself to smile as I recited, "I, Amaori Renako of Ashigaya High Class 1-A, seat 2, do declare that I have committed grievous injury to my little sister's friend and owe her recompense. If I should ever break a promise to her again, I solemnly swear to pay one hundred million yen in damages."

"Good. Now, let's see them boobies."

"Literally what?!" I shrieked—understandable, given the nature of her request—and Seira-san clicked her tongue.

She turned her phone off. All was forgiven, or so it seemed. Also, uh. One hundred million yen? Really?

"Fulfill your promise within a year, please and thank you," she said. "Should you exceed the time limit, the entire internet will know what you've done."

"Christ almighty…"

She'd got me well and good. Seira-san could ruin my entire life with a flick of her finger.

"And now we come to you, Nagipo-san," Seira-san said. "Oh yes, now we come to you."

“Hm? What about me?”

“Wait, why are you recording us?!”

Kaho-chan had her camera up, along with a sickly-sweet, doll-like smile. “’Cause you’re threatening Mai’s bestie.”

Seira-san squawked and grabbed Kaho-chan by the collar. “Turn it off, I beg you! If she sees that, she’ll never agree to meet me. Oh god, you’ll make her hate me!”

Kaho-chan looked in the other direction and whistled innocently.

Seira-san gasped and drew back. “No… Was this your goal all along?”

“This is what they call insurance, y’know?” Kaho-chan giggled.

And that meant… I raised my camera too. “So be it,” I said. “Kaho-chan, let’s see them boobies.”

“Wait, why me?” she protested.

“Ah yes,” said Seira-san. “The old Mexican standoff.”

Seira-san had me by the (metaphorical) balls. Kaho-chan had Seira-san by *her* (metaphorical) balls. So unless I went for Kaho-chan’s (figurative) nut sack, things wouldn’t be balanced. Right?

“If ya say so.” Kaho-chan sighed. “You’re a nasty perv, Rena-chin, but I guess I already knew that from all our one-on-one action.”

“Could you have picked a worse way to phrase that?!” I demanded.

Seira-san’s eyes grew wide. “Wait a sec,” she said. “You two are…?”

“Are not!” I said.

“Are too,” said Kaho-chan. “But she’s only in it for my body.”

“Kaho-chan, would you take your contacts out already?!”

Seira-san blushed, and I shuddered to think what she was imagining. “I guess that’s what happens when you hit high school,” she murmured. “How mature… Okay, never mind. Let’s get down to business. You know, the thing you wanted to see me for?”

“Oh, right.”

Before I could clear up the misunderstanding for Seira-san, the conversation moved on without me. Come to think of it, Youko-chan was under the mistaken impression that Kaho-chan and I were dating too… I wished people would start listening when I said that wasn’t true, dammit.

Anyway, back on track. “It’s about my sister,” I said.

Now that the topic had finally been broached, Seira-san’s expression darkened. “I don’t want to talk about it, which is why I kept leaving you guys on read. You know that, right?”

Eep. She sounded so accusatory.

I gave Seira-san a very small nod. “I know. And I’m sorry. But please tell me anyway. You know something, don’t you?”

Seira-san slurped some of the ice cream off her spoon. Her eyes were heavy with emotion. “Whatcha gonna do if I tell you?” she asked. “You might feel better once it’s no longer a mystery, but if you’re just asking ’cause you’re curious, you should quit while you’re ahead.”

“No, I’m not just being nosy.” Or at least I didn’t think I was, but I had trouble getting those words out.

Kaho-chan bailed me out. “Yeah, Rena-chin’s not like that.”

“Hm?” said Seira-san.

“She’s legit worried about her baby sis. ’Sides, you know I’d never go this far to help a classmate unless it was, like, a big deal. Mai even lent us her account too. We’re all helping Rena-chin ’cause she’s

seriously concerned."

Oh, Kaho-chan! She could bully and harass me to the moon and back, but that didn't change how much of a lifesaver she was at this moment. There was no way I'd ever say it out loud, but I knew: Kaho-chan was a Good Person.

…Wait a minute. That was the kind of thing a victim of domestic abuse would say.

"Hmm." Seira-san took a deep breath. Then, she finally said, "Fine. I'll tell you."

"Seriously?" I meant to follow that up with a thank you, but Seira-san stuck out her hand before I could finish.

"Save your thanks. You and Haruna will probably both hate me once I tell you."

"Huh?" Why would I hate her? That was so ominous I felt unsettled.

Seira-san began slowly. "It all started with some stupid argument. Minato spread a bad rumor, but it wasn't, like, this huge deal. Haruna totally overreacted to it."

"What was the rumor?" I asked.

"Something stupid. It doesn't matter. But Haruna started icing out Minato, and I didn't get why. I told her to stop acting like a little kid, but she wouldn't listen to me."

Neither Kaho-chan or I said a word as we listened to Seira-san's story.

"Then Minato started getting worked up too. Anyone would, right? She didn't have a clue why her friend was giving her the cold shoulder. Things got super tense."

Seira-san clenched her fists tightly on the tabletop.

“Then they had one last, huge fight. Minato rushed at Haruna, and…”

Seira-san gritted her teeth and took the final plunge.

“Haruna punched Minato.”

My eyes blew wide open in shock. “Wait. She *punched* her?!”

I understood what each of the words meant individually, but none of it made sense when put together. My sister punched her friend? I pictured my little sister laughing in the bathroom, and I couldn’t connect that same girl with the one in Seira-san’s story.

Seira-san slapped the table like she couldn’t take it any longer. “Yeah! She punched Minato right in the face.”

I flinched involuntarily.

“Don’t you think that’s terrible?” Seira-san went on. “She left a *bruise*! See, I’m a cosplayer, so I know just how important it is for a girl to take care of her face!”

My heart was pounding like crazy.

“I don’t care what excuse she has,” Seira-san yelled. “What she did was inexcusable!”

I felt so dizzy it was as if I’d been punched too. Haruna hit her friend in the face? The same friend who came to our house during summer vacation? Back then, she, Haruna, and Seira-san all looked so friendly. Looks could be deceiving, but like… What the hell, man?

I stared down into my lap. Beside me, I heard Kaho-chan say “Rena-chin?” in a concerned tone. Kaho-chan had set this whole opportunity up for me, but I just couldn’t respond at all.

“The way I see it, she’s prolly better off staying away from school,”

Seira-san added. “No one’s gonna have anything to do with her if she does show up. I guess that’s why she’s running away, huh? Coward.”

“Cool it, Serara,” Kaho-chan snapped.

She glared at Seira-san, telling her to watch her mouth, but Seira-san just kept right on going. “Haruna was one of my besties, y’know? She could get kinda carried away and obnoxious sometimes, but I thought she was a good person. I can be forgiving, but I’m not so forgiving I can ignore anyone flying off the handle the way she did.”

That sounded like a clear *We are* done*!* directed at my absent sister.

Seira-san exhaled and took a moment to calm down before she finally said, “Minato hasn’t come back to school since the day of the fight either. I keep messaging her, but she doesn’t respond. I’m really worried about her, y’know? Haruna, though… She can go take a hike.”

There was such vitriol in Seira-san’s words that I couldn’t say a thing in response. By the time I looked up, I had already left the café behind and was halfway home.

I let myself into the house without announcing my return and found Haruna flopped on the sofa playing a game. She jolted when she saw me.

“Ack!” she yelped. “I thought you were a burglar.”

Then, when she realized I was still too stunned to speak, she frowned. “What’s the matter?” she said. “Did you lose your wallet? Or what, crack your phone screen?”

“No. It’s nothing.”

I couldn’t look Haruna in the eyes. All I could do was hear her voice playing in my head: *If anyone bullied me so hard I quit school, I’d*

give them as good as I got. At that point, it'd be more like me getting suspended for fighting. She grinned as she said it, so I thought it was a joke. I could have *sworn* it was a joke.

And then there were those bandages on her hand. From punching Minato. Right?

God. What the hell was I supposed to do now? Wait for things to simmer down in another two months and send Haruna back to school? And then they would all live happily ever after, right?

Haruna cocked her head at me inquisitively, but I didn't say anything to her. I just turned and left the living room.

Behind me, she called, "You're a weirdo, you know that?"

Gah.

But even then, I couldn't say anything. So I retreated back to my room and face-planted into bed. I couldn't forget my sister's nonchalant grin or the look of hatred on Seira-san's face.

Chapter 4:
There's No Freaking Way I Can Be a Big Sister!

I HAD A DREAM THAT FEATURED a crying little girl—that was, my sister. Back when she was real little. She tugged at my sleeve and sobbed, "Oneechan, Oneechan!" She must have wanted me to comfort her, but of course I didn't have the words to make her stop crying. It was all I could do to keep myself from crying as well.

Man, I didn't remember this ever happening. Maybe my new extroversion-seeking life was so rich and flavorful I'd forgotten all about it. Or maybe it never actually happened. Maybe my brain cooked this up just because. But I didn't think so. The image of my sobbing sister looked too real to be just a dream.

When I thought hard and tried to place it, everything started to come back to me. I had been in third grade, and my little sister and I had gotten lost. I saw a crepe truck turning a corner and decided to chase after it to see where it'd go. I guess my thinking was that there must be a crepe land somewhere in the world, a place where all crepe trucks convened.

Anyway, my baby sis—still a first grader—came running after me. She may have overtaken me in height at my current age, but we were young enough back then that our two-year age gap let me call all the shots. My sister was way tinier than me, and she was always following me around.

Like a bubble rising to the surface of the water, another memory resurfaced in my mind. Having a little sister used to depress me. Every time I went up a new grade, gained new confidence, or learned something new, I always had to rein myself in to make sure my little

sister could keep up. I thought she was the ultimate hassle.

So, on the day we chased the crepe truck, I purposefully ran so fast my sister couldn't keep up. I heard her crying behind me, and I completely ignored her.

Honestly? Right from day one, I didn't have what it took to be a big sister. I asked my sister for favors or used her whenever it suited me, so it's no wonder she eventually pulled away from me. How could she ever open up to me when I treated her like this? If only I wasn't a constant screwup. If only I'd been someone she could fall back on. Someone who cared about her from the bottom of their heart.

But it was no use. There was no changing the past, and even if I could make a new future, my sister knew me too well already. She knew just how much I sucked. How could you trust someone so irredeemable? I was supposed to watch out for Haruna, but I had failed, and it was too late to wish I'd done differently.

In my mind's eye, my little sister tugged on my sleeve and wailed. I was supposed to be the big sister, and yet I let her cry.

So now, thanks to Seira-san, I knew why my sister was avoiding school. I couldn't bring myself to talk to Haruna all evening. I wound up going to school the next morning with too much left unsaid. Even a full day after the talk, my head was going in circles.

When Ajisai-san asked me, "Are you okay, Rena-chan?" I snapped to attention.

"Wha—oh, sorry!" I said, "Wh-what were we talking about again?"

We were all sitting at our desks eating lunch, and by we, I meant the Quintet. Every single one of them was staring at me.

"Um," I said. So much for disguising my zoning out. I gave up, and

I let my doom-and-gloom mood show up on my face. “Sorry. I’m still hung up on that thing about my sister.”

The others all exchanged glances before Ajisai-san looked back at me with a concerned frown.

“Mm-hmm,” she said. “You’re worried about her, huh?”

I didn’t say anything, but deep inside, I disagreed. It wasn’t worry. At least, I thought it wasn’t. I was more hung up on, well… You know.

It took some nerve, but I managed to say, “Hey… If you guys found out someone in your family did some bad stuff, what would you do?”

It was only after the conversational ball was in the conversational court that it hit me—this basically implied my sister had done something awful! I mean, she had. But that wasn’t the point! This wasn’t about me; I wanted to hear everyone else’s take.

Kaho-chan was the only one with the full context, so she jumped right on the question. “You’re mixing up your words again, Rena-chin. You meant, ‘What would you do if some bad stuff caused your li’l sis to stop going to school,’ right? Ya big goof. Don’t get so caught up in your own head.”

“Hm? Oh, uh, yes. Exactly.”

I clung to that lifeline. To heck with dignity! Not like I had any dignity to begin with.

Mai put a hand to her chin, deep in thought. “If someone in my family did something bad…” she mused.

Then Satsuki-san said, “I’d tell them off, of course.” And it sounded like she meant it.

“Even if it was your mom?” I asked.

Satsuki-san’s expression turned steely sharp for a split second. Eep.

“But of course,” she said. “My mother would go off the deep end without me around to chaperone her. She’s always bringing home odd purchases and getting in the way of my studying, you know. It’s only natural that I inform her of the consequences of her actions.”

Wow. Satsuki-san was clearly the type to drop lectures in casual conversation.

“I bet your logical lectures would do a number on my mental health,” I said.

“If only.”

Mai cut in before Satsuki-san could frown at me too hard. “Oh, you know you’re a softie. You always end your lectures with ‘I’ll give you a pass just this once.’”

“That’s only because I’ve given up completely! I know there’s no room for improvement with some folks—namely you and my mother!” Satsuki-san shouted back. The Satsuki-san Shout was a rarity at school.

Meanwhile, Ajisai-san admitted, “I’d be pretty angry, to be honest. I wish I could let ’em off with a warning, but…mmm…if nothing changed after I said something, I’d lose my patience. Like, come on! Get with the program!”

She frowned hard. Being the big sis to two little brothers must have been tough.

Satsuki-san nodded. “I understand exactly how you feel. However, while your familial pet peeves are children, my mother is thirty-four.”

That came as such a shock that I felt my head go ka-boom. Both Kaho-chan and I yelled, “Oh my god! She’s young!”

Like, if I did the math, that meant that Satsuki-san’s mom had her when she was seventeen. Right? That was only a year older than me! That meant it was technically possible for *me* to have a kid with Mai

next year… Wait. No, no, no. That wasn't at all possible. We lacked the right combination of bits to make that happen!

But dang. That startled me. No wonder I'd thought Satsuki-san's mom was her older sister when we first met.

Anyway, we had drifted off topic by this point, so Kaho-chan pulled us back on track. "If it was me?" she said. "I dunno, I'd be like, 'Girl! What's your problem?' But like, as soon as they did whatever the bad thing was. Or else the warning wouldn't stick, y'know? Timing's everything."

"Mm-hmm. It really is," Ajisai-san agreed.

I wasn't so sure. Didn't that mean you only had one shot to blow up at them? Did that still hold true when it came to family?

Well, at least everyone had answered. Except, wait. Mai hadn't gone yet.

"Really, what would I do?" she said. Oddly, her voice lacked its usual confidence, and she smiled in a distant sort of way. "You know, I don't think I would be able to say much of anything."

Satsuki-san remarked, almost offhand, "It's nothing to beat yourself up about. This is only a thought experiment. Besides, I'm sure your mother is much less infuriating than mine."

"Oh, no. Your mother is a gem."

"I might share your opinion if only I didn't live with her."

Ajisai-san remarked, "Your mom is Oduka Renée, right? I see her on TV sometimes. She's so striking, I doubt I'd be able to say a word against her either."

"Isn't she? She's perfectly imposing."

Ajisai-san did something halfway between a smile and a grimace, but Mai smiled back at her.

As clichéd as it may have been to say so, I guessed every family really was different. The other girls in the Quintet were so much better than me I just always assumed they lived way more glamorous lives. But maybe their home situations weren't all they seemed cracked up to be. It wasn't like their talents gave them a free pass through life. They just worked that much harder than I did.

Just then, Mai asked me, "What about you, Renako?"

"Me?" I needed a moment to formulate a response. God. What about me, indeed. "I feel like it'd be a good idea to chew them out. I mean, it feels like the right thing to do. You know?"

"Ahh, yes. The right thing to do." Mai picked up on the implication of my phrasing.

It was just… You know. As Haruna's big sister, I was probably supposed to get mad at her for punching someone. The fact that I didn't represented some sort of failure on my part. If I'd been a better sister, like Ajisai-san, I would have gotten mad. But I couldn't even do that. I wasn't cut out to be an elder sibling.

I hung my head and balled my hands into fists.

Ajisai-san's voice came sliding in. "You know… Rena-chan, I don't think you need to worry about what's right or wrong."

"What do you mean?" I looked up and caught her eye. She smiled at me with a look of complete tenderness.

"I know I tell my brothers off all the time, but that doesn't make it the right thing to do. I just do it 'cause, well, I feel like I have to," she explained.

Oh.

"I think the others would agree with me," she went on. "Right, Kaho-chan, Satsuki-chan?"

Mai spoke up, sounding almost pained. “Well, in my case…”

Ajisai-san smiled at her. “We all know your mom’s a great person. Even if she does something wrong, you trust that it’ll turn out okay in the end. Right?”

“…Yes, I suppose. Thank you, Ajisai.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ajisai-san shook her head.

Kaho-chan’s hand shot up. “Uh-huh! I’m just sayin’ it for Mokeko’s sake.”

Satsuki-san hesitated, then joined in. “I only chastise my mother because I’m tired of her making the same mistakes over and over.”

Ajisai-san gave her an *Oh, you!* look of fond exasperation. But Satsuki-san seemed frustrated, so she must have really meant it.

“Anyway,” Ajisai-san said, “it’s not a matter of you being right or wrong. So long as you’re looking out for Haruna, that’s all that matters.”

Yeah, but what exactly did that entail?

“Like how you do for me and Mai-chan,” she added.

“Oh!”

I did a double take and looked over at Ajisai-san, then Mai—the two people I was dating. Sure enough, society would probably question my ability to judge right or wrong after choosing to date both at the same time. Well, “question” was a charitable way to look at it. Go after me with a butcher knife for it, maybe. But that ship had sailed.

And maybe I already was looking out for the ones I loved. It felt to me like some kind of cheat code you could only use once. But maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t. Maybe Ajisai-san was right. Maybe I didn’t have to think in terms of right or wrong answers. I still couldn’t picture a scenario that’d necessitate hitting someone, but whatever. You could say the same about two-timing. Maybe it was only a problem of me being

too narrow-minded.

"Thanks, guys," I said. "I'll give this a little more thought."

I bowed, grateful for their support. I guess this gave me a game plan. Of sorts. Maybe. I guess.

I just finished dawdling my way through the process of getting my stuff together and pulling my backpack on when I heard someone behind me singsong, "Oh, Renako-kun!"

I turned, and there she was: the perpetually cheerful and adorable protagonist of Class B.

"Youko-chan!" I said. I felt myself automatically tense up. This was the very same girl who (perish the thought!) tried to hook me up with boys!

"Don't look so nervous," she said. "It's all chill. I'm alone today, see?" She knew exactly what I was thinking. She spread her arms with a grin.

"You promise?" I said.

"Gosh, you really are on your guard." She beamed at me, but I didn't know what there was to be so happy about.

"It's, uh, not like that," I said. "I just. Um. I had some important stuff to do. I'm sorry I couldn't hang out with you! I really appreciated the invite! Promise!"

Youko-chan giggled. "You're a peach, Renako-kun."

I weakly laughed back. Argh. I always laughed whenever I felt guilty. But laughter was good, right? Yeah, I needed to laugh more. Wasn't I a popular girl? I needed to laugh like Kaho-chan!

"Aww, nooo way!" I said. "You're too sweet. Anyway, what's poppin', bestie?"

“Huh? Where did that come from? Are you okay? …Wait, why do you look depressed?”

It was no use. Kaho-chan was the only person who could get away with saying “what’s poppin’?” Trying to copy her obliterated my MP. Ah, I could already see the Sanzu River! Take me away, O river that borders the afterlife!

“Never mind,” I said. “Just forget it. Anyway, what’s up?”

“Oh, yeah! I wanted to ask you a quick thing.”

“Shoot.”

Youko-chan tugged on my sleeve and led me to the end of the hallway. Then she leaned in real close and whispered in my ear, “So, there’s something you need to know.”

“Y-yeah?”

I flashed back to the moment when she crammed us both into a locker. My cheeks grew red, although I couldn’t have told you why. *Ever heard of the term personal space, Youko-chan?* If she tried to repeat the same move here and now, people would totally get the wrong idea.

However, when Youko-chan continued, the name out of her mouth was the last thing I ever expected.

“Do you know a girl by the name of Nashiji Komachi?”

For a minute, I doubted my own ears. “Who?” I said. I stared back at her. “Why are you asking?”

“Good question. Why do you think?” She linked her arms behind her back and grinned at me, but there was something about that smile I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“Uh, I dunno.”

Youko-chan giggled. “Okay. It’s no biggie. I just heard through the grapevine that you guys might know each other. So I was kinda curious

if you're friends, but that's all."

"Oh, okay," I managed to stutter out. I felt horribly shaken.

Youko-chan, meanwhile, just gave me a sunny smile. That was how she rolled—sunny all the way. I must have just imagined that inscrutable smile earlier.

No one was supposed to know about Nashiji Komachi-san. After all, she was the ringleader of my classmates who iced me out back in junior high.

"B-by the way," I said, "who told you that rumor?"

"Hmm. I don't remember." She laughed. "Sorry, it's totally escaping me."

"Oh. All right."

This was bad, bad news. My extroverted facade was crumbling.

I half grinned, half forced myself to grin, and said, "Th-the name kinda rings a bell. I think we went to the same junior high."

"Really? You guys weren't close, though?"

"Nah."

Yeah, understatement of the century. She loathed me, obviously. That wasn't up for debate.

"Hmm." Youko-chan squinted, which made her look like a predator sizing up its dinner. "That makes a lot of sense."

"What does?"

"Nothin'! Just thinking out loud. Sorry for weirding you out." Youko-chan took a step back. "I'm still not the best at reading between the lines, y'know? I'm guessing I shouldn't have brought up the topic. Sorry! Next time, I'll have something way more fun for us to chat about."

Back when were in the locker, Youko-chan had confessed to me how her lack of filter made finding friends a struggle. So I said, “No, don’t worry. It’s chill.” I could feel my smile dangling by a thread, but I made sure to wave my hands in a big “no” gesture. “I’m just glad you reached out to chat with me. You don’t need to worry about boundaries with me, I promise.”

“You’re so sweet, Renako-kun!”

She gave my arm a friendly squeeze, and I went “Ah ha” like the faker I was.

“Okay, then I’ll catch you later!” she said.

“Sure. See you later.”

Youko-chan spun on her heel and was gone. Leaving just me and my elevated heart rate.

Okay. Guys. What the hell was that all about? I felt an icy rain in my heart, even now, and it’d been a whole year since I’d heard that name. There was no way. But was there? Was Youko-chan actually one of Nashiji-san’s friends?

I went home with a ball of anxiety still lurking in my stomach. Oh, I was no stranger to this sensation. It brought me back to the days when I dreaded going to school every single morning. Well. Before long, that morphed into me *actually* skipping school. Ah ha. Ha. Haaah.

“I’m home,” I called as I stepped through the front door.

For the time being, I decided to put the Nashiji-san issue under mental lock and key. It wasn’t like this was going to blow up in my face tomorrow or anything. Naturally, I wished the whole issue could have just vanished at some point in my high school career, but you couldn’t have everything in life.

As I trudged to my bedroom, I noticed my sister's door was open just a crack. I peeked in. She was sitting on the ground hugging a pillow to her chest, playing one of the games I'd lent her. Right where I left her, then. It was like time had stopped in this one room of the house.

But you know…she didn't look happy. She looked like the way I used to be. I didn't only play games because I enjoyed them, you know? They just served as ways to kill time. I held on to that controller just so the calendar pages would tear off and flutter past me.

I opened the door quietly, so as not to disturb her. "Haruna?" I said.

"Hmm?" She looked over her shoulder at me. "Hey there."

"Hey there yourself."

I squeezed my fists behind my back so she wouldn't see. I tried to talk, but the words wouldn't come out.

"What's the matter?" she said. I mean, I was just standing there. She cocked her head in confusion, and in that expression and the look in her eye, I saw the much younger version of Haruna who chased me, bawling, in my dream.

Right. I knew what I had to do.

"I remember," I said.

"Huh?"

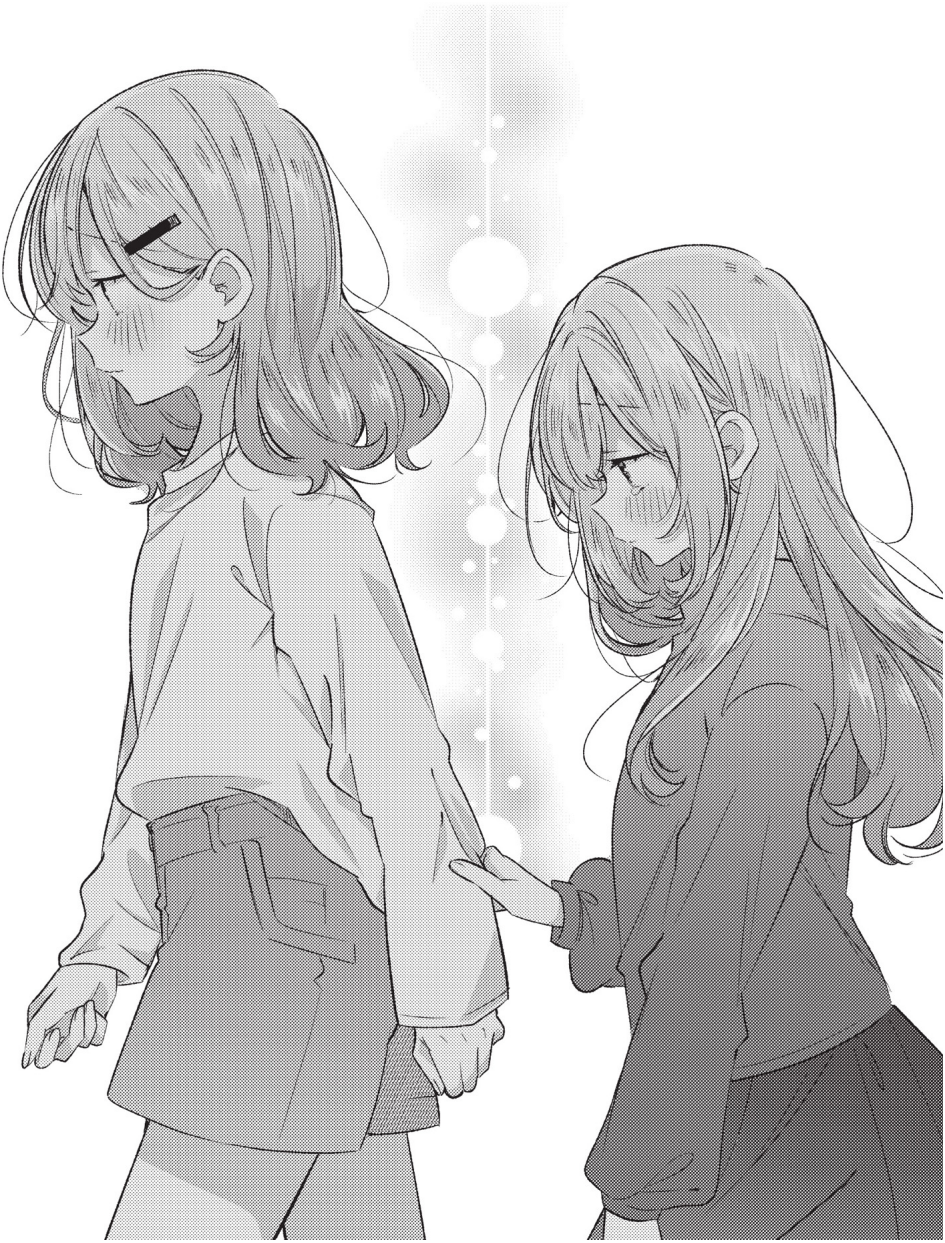
I thought I had run off after the crepe van and ditched my sis. But I hadn't. Because she kept clinging to my sleeve the whole time.

I heard her howling even now, her words too indistinct to make out through the sobs. Try as I might, I couldn't shake her free. So I turned around and spoke to her. What I said, I couldn't recall. And I likewise didn't remember what she said back. But I knew I turned. I knew I came back to my sister as she stood there in the middle of the

road, crying her eyes out. And I *knew* I gave her the tightest hug of her life. I must have apologized a million times for leaving her behind until she eventually stopped crying.

By then, we were so far away from home we were thoroughly lost. It was getting late, so we set off back the way we had come. It felt longer than the way there. We kept walking, but it seemed like we were never going to make it back. I almost gave up all hope, but I couldn't break down and cry in front of my sister. That became the glue that, somehow, kept me from falling to pieces.

We ended up not getting home until almost dusk. I couldn't blame myself for wanting to forget this memory—it sure didn't paint me in a good light. But you know what? I *came back* for my sister. Yeah. YEAH. I did. And thank god. When it all came down to it, I *did* do the right thing.



And you wanna know why? Because I was her big sister, and that's what being a big sister was all about.

"Oneechan?" my sister prompted.

"Yeah," I said. I nodded. "Yeah!"

"What're you 'yeah'ing about?"

"I'm your big sister, remember?"

"Um, what?" my sister said.

She may have been taller than me, and she may have been so mature it was hard to tell which one of us was older. But she was still my little sister. And that meant it wasn't about the right or wrong answers—so long as I did what my heart told me to.

"And that means," I told her, "that no matter what happens, I always have your back. That's what being a big sister is all about."

Her eyes widened. "What the heck? That's rich, coming from you." She smirked at me in a condescending sort of way.

I turned, and I left her room. I dropped off my bag and pulled out my phone. Hand on my chest. *Deep breaths, Renako.* I prayed to god—not any god I knew, but a completely unfamiliar one. I didn't even know what to call them. But I did know that this same god probably looked a lot like someone in the Quintet.

It took a few days, but the recipient of my message showed up at the train station one evening with a frown on her face.

"Not again," she said—she being my little sister's classmate that I'd met a couple days prior. Seira-san. I had a burning question for her.

"Sorry about all the trouble," I said. "But thanks for agreeing to meet me."

Seira-san didn't say anything for a moment. Then she grumbled,

“This is about Haruna, isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah. But…” I was a little confused. Seira-san, like a lot of junior high schoolers, wore casual clothing when she was out and about. But what was with the apron? “What’s the deal with those clothes?”

“Hm? Oh, this?” What, like she hadn’t noticed? She hurried to cover her chest with her hands. “I-I was just, uh! Doing chores!”

I saw the logo for a dry-cleaning company peeking through her fingers. Uh?

“You do chores for Onigawara Cleaners?” I asked.

“Ack!” She grimaced like I’d just waved her least favorite food under her nose. “Well. Yes.”

Suddenly, she glared at me with all her might. “What’s that for?!” I spluttered.

“What, you got a problem with it? It’s literally right there in my name: Onigawara Seira! O-Ni-Ga-Wa-Ra! Yeah, I’ve heard all the jokes a billion times. I *know* it means butt-ugly. Get all the laughter out of your system!”

“I’m not laughing!”

I shook my head as she practically lunged for my throat. Believe me, I knew laughing at someone’s name topped the no-no list of rude comments. And since I was older, it was on me to make Seira-san feel better.

“I think it’s cute!” I said. “It describes you perfectly.”

“Do you really wanna catch these hands?”

“No! I just. Um. Look, oni are cute. Yeah, totally! You know that story about the sad red oni, right? That’s a sweet tale about friendship. And uh… Oh, there’s Kibutsuji Muzan. The guy from *Demon Slayer*? He’s an oni, and the whole internet loves him!”

“If you’re going to bring up fictional examples, Nezuko’s right there!”

Agh. I was trying to make her feel better, but I was only making her think worse of me. My conversational skills were seriously hot garbo.

“Well, is that all you had to say?!” Seira-san spat. “Can I go home already?”

“Sorry, um, I still have the stuff I need to ask you…”

She groaned with such force it could have wrung out a sopping bath towel in two seconds. “I don’t want to talk about her. I think you’re cutting her too much slack just because she’s your family.”

“I mean, maybe,” I said. “That’s possible.” I didn’t know how to word it properly, so I decided to just word-vomit my feelings. “See, the thing is, I want to trust Haruna.”

Seira-san huffed, clearly annoyed at me. “What, you think I’m lying?”

“No.” I looked down. “I don’t think trust is black or white. Like it’s something you do or don’t do. I just think that Haruna must have her own reasons.” I knew my sister, and I knew she wouldn’t punch someone unprompted. “I know that if I did something wrong, I’d want to own up to it. And find a way to get past it, you know? So it’s like, if I take all of that into account, I think I trust Haruna.”

Seira-san frowned. “I’m not following. Like, I get that life’s complex, but that doesn’t change the fact that she hit someone.”

“Yeah.” It didn’t. In the end, I could only be responsible for me—not anyone else. I couldn’t expect that sentiment or my feelings for my family to perfectly extend to other people.

I looked down at the ground and the shoes I had bought just the

other day. By now, they were well broken in. Had dirt and stuff on 'em too. I remembered the sensation, the body warmth, of my sister as she carried me home that day.

Seira-san sighed once again like she was giving up. "Yeah, sorry. I don't get it. Let's just move on—do you need anything else?"

"Seira-san." I lifted my head. "Are you happy with this?"

"Happy with what? Look, I feel like you're just trying to use me, and I'm getting kinda pissed. But I mean…" She folded her arms across her apron. "Just for you, Oneesan-senpai. Haruna's self-centered and keeps trying to use other people to make herself look good…but at the end of the day, she used to be a friend. So."

"Okay." I bowed very deeply. "Thank you so much, Seira-san."

Why the thank you? Because she was Haruna's friend. Maybe it wasn't my place to say, since Haruna had done the work making friends, but yeah. I felt grateful.

"But you better tell Oduka-san I said hi!" Seira-san reminded me, her hands on her hips in defiance. She reminded me so much of Kaho-chan I couldn't help but grin.

"Yeah, I will." Then I decided to tell her up front. "Seira-san, I want to…"

Once she heard me out, Seira-san stared back at me in dumbfounded shock. "Are you for real? You haven't, like, lost your mind?"

"My mind's still here, last I checked." Well, maybe. I wasn't a hundred percent sure of that.

I felt like I'd screwed up big time, like if I broke a school window in some place no one was going to notice immediately. I could have

acted like nothing happened, but that seemed cowardly to me. Therefore, I tried as hard as I could to make full eye contact with Seira-san.

She was quiet for a moment, and then she pulled out her phone. “Fine,” she said. “But you know, she’s gonna see you as the big sis of her assailant.”

I gulped. Her way of wording it made me freeze, but I’d come too far to chicken out. After all, I promised to always have my sister’s back.

“Please, Seira-san,” I said. *“Help me meet up with Minato-san.”*

***

I was so frozen, I felt like my body temp dropped another degree every second. Minato-san would be here in just a few minutes. My shadow stretched out long in the late afternoon sun as I waited in my favorite park for the girl my sister had punched.

Seira-san wasn’t with me. She said earlier, “I don’t wanna stick around” and peaced out. That left only me.

This was bold. Really bold. I mean, meeting the person my sister punched and asking her, “So, what’d she punch you for?” took guts. If the big sis of someone I was fighting with showed up and asked me, like. Bruh. I don’t even know what I’d do. It implied that getting punched made sense in context. Having Haruna’s back made me Minato’s enemy.

“Choosing something’s the same as ruling out all other options,” I reminded myself. That was the conclusion I came to during the interclass competition. It made me tremble. I still didn’t feel strong enough, like mentally, to pull this off.

Even so…no matter how weak I was…I was still Haruna's big sister. I wanted to believe in her. After all, hadn't she been here for me all along?

"Yeah," I said, trying to hype myself up. "Now it's my turn to put in the effort."

The image of six-year-old Haruna crying and waiting for me to come back for her flashed through my mind. That's what kept me standing there.

I was torn. One part of me wanted Minato to show up, while the other hoped she no-showed. Once I heard footsteps approaching, I knew the first part got its way. I turned, my anxiety dialed to max. Yup, there was no mistaking it. This was the same girl who'd been at my house during summer break.

She was just a hair taller than Haruna. Her bob gave her a fresh, clean look, as did her overall slim figure. The mark on her face was gone but not the internal scars. According to Seira-san, she was still ditching school.

Minato-san came up to me with a neutral, somewhat uncertain expression, like I was an unfamiliar teacher who'd suddenly stopped her to talk.

My nerves went haywire. "Um. Uh. Hi," I said.

Okay, so we met. Now what? What was I supposed to say? Getting words out of me was like trying to squeeze the last of the ketchup out of the bottle.

Minato-san spoke up first. "So I hear you want to talk about Haruna?"

"Uh." I put my hands together in front of my chest and nodded.

“Y-yeah, that’s correct. Sorry for making you come all this way. But I appreciate it. I just, um.”

What with the way I kept stopping and starting, I could have been communicating in Morse code.

Minato-san said, straight out, “You’re her sister, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. We, um, met over summer break. Although I guess I never really introduced myself.”

What was the right facial expression to make? The right tone of voice? The right body language? I didn’t have the slightest of clues, so I had to fumble my way through the conversation. I couldn’t back out. Not now.

“My name’s Amaori Renako,” I said. “Thank you, um, for being Haruna’s friend.”

I would be okay. I could do it. I was the big sis, after all.

“…I’m not really. Not anymore,” Minato-san said. She looked away.

Argh. Well, yeah. That probably sounded sarcastic, since they had their fight and all. Look at me. Messing up right off the bat. But still! No matter how many times I messed up, I could always try again.

Minato-san put a hand on her cheek and introduced herself in turn. And that, my friend, was when the biggest bombshell of all dropped.

Because she said, “Nice to meet you. I’m *Nashiji Minato*.”

Suddenly, everything sounded like it was a million kilometers away. I felt dizzy, like that bomb had pulverized the ground beneath my feet. Sorry? She was *who* Minato?

“Wha—?” I said. She was *WHO*? “Nashiji…san?”

“Yeah?” she said.

I felt like I was groping around in a box, trying to find the knife inside. I could cut myself on its edge at any moment, but I had no choice but to stick my hand in.

“Minato-san, do you by any chance…have an older sister?” I ventured.

Now that I looked at her head-on, I could totally see it. There was a familial resemblance.

“Um, yes?” She was clearly baffled by my odd behavior. Then, to dispel the awkwardness, she admitted, “Her name’s Nashiji Komachi. She’s in her first year of high school.”

And then that very next instant, everything from junior high came flooding back. Words too powerful to repeat, words too painful to think about.

Next thing I knew, I was running for my life. My throat tightened up, and I could barely breathe. In the back of my mind, a voice whispered, *Hey, you know why Haruna punched Minato-san? What if…it was all because of you?*

The Amaori Haruna Side of the Story: Season 1

HER VISION TURNED RED, and next thing she knew, Haruna was swinging her fist right into Minato's face. There was a dull smacking noise followed by a scream. Then panting. Ragged breathing.

Minato fell onto her backside, clutching her cheek. She looked up at Haruna. "What the hell?" she demanded. "What's wrong with you? Why are you so hung up on this?!"

Haruna stepped forward, but before she could go far, Seira leaped in between the girls.

"Stop it!" she shouted. "Stop it, both of you. Aren't you friends?"

Haruna gritted her teeth. She wanted to hit Minato again, but instead she screamed at the top of her lungs:

□□

But before she could hear herself scream all over again, Haruna came to with a lurch alone in her bedroom. "Wha?" she mumbled.

Before her, the TV screen—left on while she'd dozed off—showed the results of her last ranked match. Whopping defeat.

"Oh. Right," she said.

She must have fallen asleep after her last game. Her sleep schedule and daily rhythms were all topsy-turvy. No wonder she felt tired in the middle of the day. Without badminton to burn off her excess energy, she lacked the comfortable feeling of fatigue, which quickly translated into lower quality sleep. She used to go running in the afternoons, but all the eyes on her stung. What girl her age went running in the middle of the school day? So she soon gave that up too. Now she ran laps around the

neighborhood early in the morning or at night.

Haruna stifled back a yawn. “I’m so goddamned bored.”

She threw her arms out and flopped onto her side. She looked up, but there was nothing new to see. Just the same old ceiling. She held her hand up and watched the light come through the spaces between her fingers. Her hand was good as new. The only mark of the incident left was that persistent, icky feeling from punching someone. She didn’t know when it would go away, if it ever would.

“God. I hate this,” she groaned.

She rolled over onto her side and started to screw around on her phone, just for the heck of it. Without anyone to compete against—be it in schoolwork or games—she didn’t have the motivation to do anything. Still, even with nothing to do, her days passed in a blur. She’d go to the park and practice her swing with her racket, but she could feel the sensation of playing in a real match slipping away by the day. She felt like she was bleeding out. Or, if not losing blood, then something else just like it. Something physical and vital.

Some days, the things Ajisai, Satsuki, and Mai told her reared their ugly heads. Other days, her insecurities needled at her without end.

But she had already made up her mind: two months. No matter how bored she got, no matter how shitty she felt, she refused to deviate from her plans. No, those plans were not changing on her watch. Not one bit.

“But oh my god,” she moaned. She raised both hands up over her head. “I’m just. So. BORED!”

She could scream all she wanted in her bedroom, because no one was ever going to hear.

The Koto Satsuki Kronicles:
Season 1

"Are you sure you're not hiding anything?" the girl walking alongside Satsuki asked.

Satsuki glanced at her. "What makes you ask?"

"I dunno. Detective's intuition, I s'pose." Terusawa Youko gave Satsuki a grin that belonged on a mask.

Satsuki sighed. "Why does it concern you if I'm hiding anything? I may be working with you to break up Amaori Renako and Oduka Mai, but that's the extent of our partnership."

"I guess, but I dunno. Seems like there's more to it than that. Like, you stopped me from inviting Renako-kun to a mixer, y'know? I was gonna get proof of her cheating and turn it in to the big boss. Are you suggestin' that's a bad thing?"

"No, that was on you. You slipped up," Satsuki insisted. "If you keep being so forceful, you'll make Amaori more wary of you than ever."

The two girls walked into the elevator of Queen Rose HQ, and Youko pressed the button for the fifth floor. As she watched the numbers tick up, she said, "You know Renako-kun inside and out, don'tcha?"

"Your point being?"

"Nothin'," Youko teased. "Still. I may not be world's best detective, but I know a thing or two about gathering intel. I might have some dirt on Lover Girl that you don't."

"Good for you."

"Oh? Even if it's not good for you?"

Youko leaned in close to peer at Satsuki before Satsuki shooed her away with a flap of a hand. “You’re awfully flippant,” Satsuki said.

“Hm?”

“I can never tell how much of what you say you truly mean. It makes you untrustworthy.”

That stunned Youko into silence for a few seconds. Then she scratched the back of her head, pursed her lips, and sighed. “Yup. Occupational hazard of being a detective, I guess.”

“How so?”

“Never mind. Don’t worry ’bout it. Just ’cause we’re working together doesn’t mean we have to be best buds. I’ll be good from now on, ’kay? Besides, I already did my part.”

“That you did. Either way, Amaori is still too wary of you for you to be of much use. That invariably leaves the rest to me.”

“I guess. I wish I coulda buttered her up faster, but oh well. I didn’t realize it’d be so hard. Renako-kun’s kinda shrewd, don’tcha think?”

More like she was debilitatingly socially anxious, to Satsuki’s mind. Still, Youko had a rather unusual assessment of Renako’s qualities, which made Satsuki feel slightly unsettled.

“Anyway,” Youko went on, “I’m gonna let you handle the *Renako-kun part*. The big boss asked me to watch over a special guest.”

“What guest?”

Youko giggled in a manner that suggested there was more to this figure than such an innocent mention warranted. Satsuki was rankled, but she refused to ask.

Presently, the elevator door opened, and the two girls walked down the hall toward their destination. Satsuki’s phone chose that

opportunity to ring. Mai. Satsuki did not want another person listening in on her conversation with Mai, doubly so if it was a sensitive topic.

Which Youko knew all too well. Yet she persisted in playing dumb and said, “Oh, don’t mind me! Answer your phone.”

“…Fine. Just go on ahead, and I’ll catch up later,” said Satsuki.

“Sure thing.”

Satsuki waited for Youko to step away before she took the call. “Hello?”

“Is that you, Satsuki?” asked Mai.

“This is my phone, so one could assume as much.”

“Well, your mother has been known to pick up if I call when you’re in the bath,” Mai explained.

Satsuki’s tongue moved on its own to click in annoyance. “Noted. I’ll start bringing my phone with me to the bathroom. Thanks for informing me.”

“But of course. It’s my pleasure.”

Mai sounded composed, which suggested this phone call was nothing more than idle chitchat. “What are you up to?” Satsuki said.

“Oh, not much. I just have a bit of spare time, you see. I’m enjoying my day off over a cup of coffee. Canned coffee is rather flavorless, wouldn’t you say? I’m a much bigger fan of the coffee you make.”

“The cheap instant coffee?”

“Cheap it may be, but I find it delightful. Perhaps love is the secret ingredient.”

“I’ll be sure to buy you a can the next time I’m at the supermarket,” Satsuki snapped.

Mai laughed on the other end of the line. In any other situation, Satsuki would have hung up the moment she heard Mai didn't have any reason to call. But this was perfect timing. Satsuki had questions that needed answers.

"Incidentally," she asked, "have you noticed anything…odd, shall we say, in your daily life?"

Satsuki detected no shred of suspicion when Mai answered, "Odd? Yes, I suppose so."

"And that would be what?"

"A childhood friend of mine—not you, that is—called me recently. She said she was concerned for me."

Satsuki frowned. "That is strange."

"Isn't it? For a moment, I thought another awful rumor about me had crossed the ocean without my knowing."

"It must be tough to live in the public eye."

Satsuki started walking. She'd heard enough to answer her suspicions, and she was about to end the call when Mai spoke up again.

"Satsuki, hold on. I just received a message." Satsuki could hear the tension in Mai's voice. "A, ah, bolt out of the blue, as it were."

"What happened?"

Bewildered, Mai reported:

"It appears that a person has arrived in Japan claiming to be my *fiancée*."

Satsuki fell silent. She stared straight ahead at the office door before her. In front of it stood Youko and a tall girl with silver hair. The

latter of the two was so gorgeous that, even among Queen Rose's lineup of models, she stood out, as dazzling as a piece of platinum.

The girl noticed Satsuki's eyes on her and broke out into a broad smile. She waved, delighted.

Satsuki kept her face perfectly still and asked her phone, "Is it who I think she is?"

"Yes," Mai said. And she repeated the name of the girl standing directly in front of Satsuki. "That would be Lucie Lefebvre."

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU. My name is Teren Mikami.

We've now made it to Volume 6. Believe it or not, I managed to pack the whole story into 256 pages in the Japanese version. (Just as it says on the ads!) Mm-hmm, that's right. I split a single episode into two parts, so *of course* it couldn't get too long. Right? Not like that fat tome Volume 5. If you broke that bad boy into two pieces, each one would've been 240 pages.

Sorry, what was that? Volume 6 is 320 pages? No way. You're pulling my leg.

…

Okay. Well! To average it out, I'll write Volume 7 in 192 pages.

Oh, that'll never work. This is an admission of guilt. I have no confidence in my ability to write a concise story within the allotted pages. But it's not my fault! It's all Renako. Just look at how she talks!

Your Honor, I think I've proved my innocence, so I'm going to move into the usual business of afterwords.

(SPOILER-FREE!) SUMMARY OF VOLUME 6

Okay, so this is the first half of a two-parter story. It's basically about Amaori Renako's (superior) little sister Haruna. It also continues the broader, unrelated story. In the second half, we're going to see Renako fighting for her life to win, which is necessary for survival in cruel human society. You can do it, Renako.

Hmm. What the heck am I supposed to write here, when this is only the first part of the story? Whatever I say will just end up being a

spoiler for part two.

You know what? Let's talk about something else.

THE COVER OF VOLUME 6

When we're talking light novels, which cover do you think is the most important? Volume 1, right? No brainer. You can't just flip a light novel open and bam, see if it's interesting—like it's all words, you know—so the cover, obi, the blurb, and all the rest are crucial for promotion.

I imagine a lot of publishers approach this like, "Now's my time to shine!" You only have a single cover to work with, but you somehow need to convey the tone of the story, its hook, and its appeal to its target audience. This must weigh on publisher minds constantly.

Same goes for *TNFWIBYLU*. I remember a ton of prep went into the cover of Volume 1.

Anyway, so what about when Volume 6 rolls around? Naturally, covers are important regardless of book, and there will always be people who, well…judge a book by its cover. Still, it's not as crucial to apply strategy and theory like it is on a Volume 1. Here, you're more trying to show yet another reason to fall in love with the series.

Which brings us to the cover of this book. I think this cover approaches *TNFWIBYLU* from a whole new angle, which achieves the goal stated above. Yay! By the way, I asked my publisher to please "have Haruna in front looking super cute and Renako standing behind her making a face that no yuri main character ever should." And she sure is. Only in *TNFWIBYLU* could I get away with that. Just look at her. Isn't she gorgeous?

(Thank you so much, Takeshima-san!)

Takeshima-san's amazing character designs!

Thar be slight spoilers here.

Anyway, a new girl shows up in Volume 6. I have her set up to be one of the main characters in season two of this series. (And there may be one more after her!)

Takeshima-san has always worked super hard on these great character designs, so I will try to do her artwork justice. I hope everyone is looking forward to Volume 7 and beyond.

Oh, and Youko-chan got an illustration too. She's going to be a main player in season two as well, so you'll see even more of her soon! Whee, here she comes!

Okay, let me put my final thoughts in order. (← a Herculean task)

There's one thing I worry about, literally right up to the deadline on every single book, and this book was no exception: the cliffhanger. How much information do I want to give, you know? I fiddled with that right up to the very last second. I didn't want to focus so hard on pulling a plot twist that I disappointed readers.

I'll try to get Volume 7 out as fast as I can… I mean, I'd love to… I know what I want to write, so all that remains isss…the writing. Please be patient with me!

And now on to the acknowledgments.

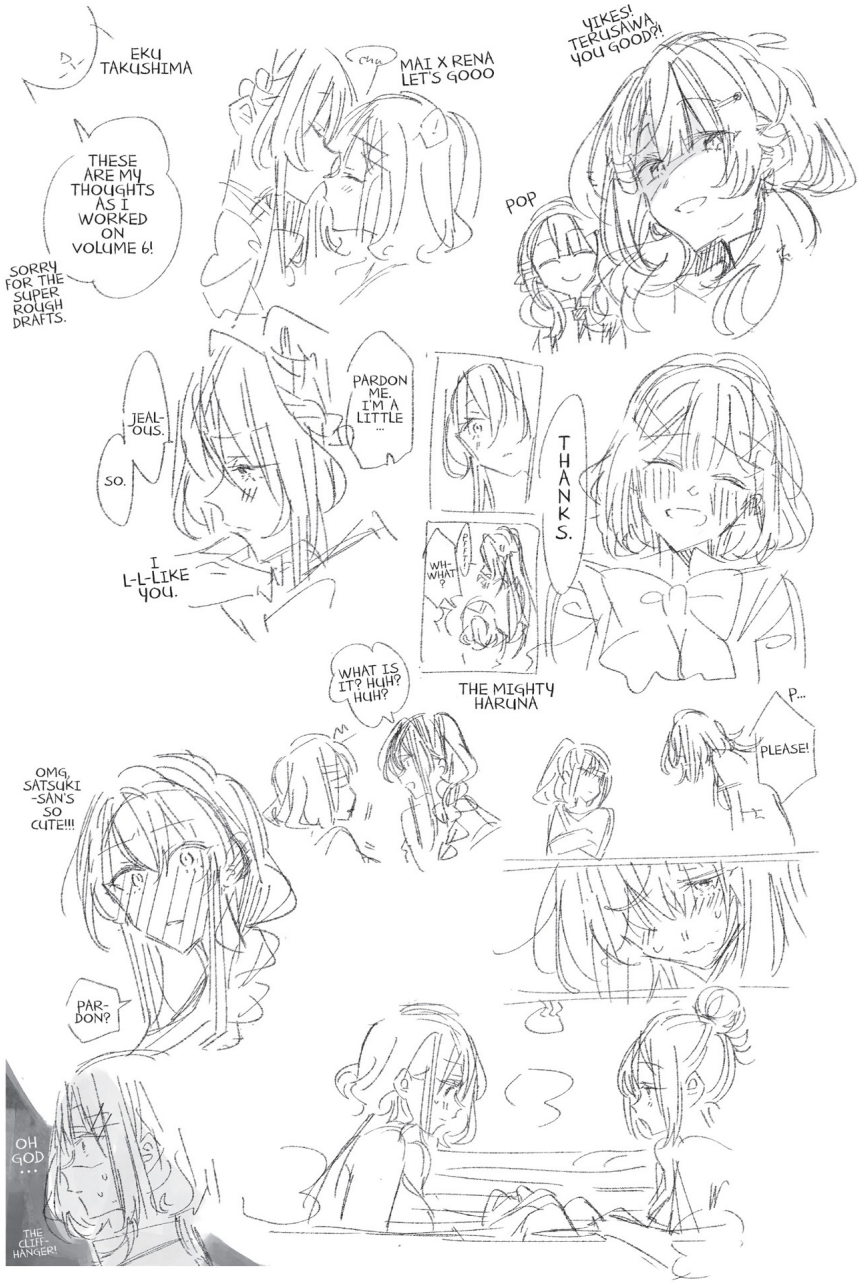
Eku Takeshima-sensei, I've already told you this a hundred times, but congratulations on the *Whisper Me a Love Song* anime! You often send me your thoughts on this series after you read each book, but this time you sent me sketches too! They would have been wasted on me alone, so we had it published at the end of this book. Whoo! (That's me high-fiving the reader.)

And thank you to everyone who helped get this book out the door. Likewise, a big thank you to Musshu-sensei, the artist responsible for the manga version of this series. Did you know the manga Volume 6 is out too? We're getting to the best bits of the LN Volume 3!

Finally, make sure you guys check out my other yuri romcom *AriOto*. (Currently only available in Japanese.) We need to get through *TNFWIBYLU* Volume 7 first, so it'll be a bit of a wait. But I'll do my best to make *AriOto* Volume 8 fantastic.

See you next time in the second half of this story. Can't wait to show you the end of this scenario and a blast from Renako's past!

Teren Mikami, signing off!


EKU TAKUSHIMA
THESE ARE MY THOUGHTS AS I WORKED ON VOLUME 6!
SORRY FOR THE SUPER ROUGH DRAFTS.
MAI X RENA LET'S GOOO
YIKES! TERUSAWA YOU GOOD?!
POP
PARDON ME. I'M A LITTLE ...
JEAL-OUS.
SO.
I L-L-LIKE YOU.
WH-WHAT?
THANKS.
THE MIGHTY HARUNA
WHAT IS IT? HUH? HUH?
P...
PLEASE!
OMG, SATSUKI -SAN'S SO CUTE!!!
PAR-DON?
OH GOD ...
THE CLIFF-HANGER!

TNFWIBYLU VOLUME 6!
SHH
SHH
SHH.
TEE HEE HEE!
TEE HEE HEE!
WHO'S THAT?
BRUH!
AH HA!
RENAKO!
SURE! WILL THAT BE A GRANDE OR A VENTI?
C-COULD I GET A LARGE FRAPPU-CINO?
HUH?
PEOPLE BUY THIS STUFF?!
WHITE
I GIVE UP!
HUBBA HUBBA!
IN THE S★LATOON ZONE
THE PIGGY-BACK SCENE STUCK WITH ME.
RENAKO
HARUNA'S A GOOD KID.
IT'S LUCIE-CHAN!

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